

Marshall of the Lawless (1933)

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Marshall Of Lawless

SUDDEN

When Jim Green took on the job of Marshal in the roaring hell town of Lawless, he soon knew he'd tackled a tough one. But he had no idea just how tough a job it was until he discovered there was a man pirating around the town on a black stallion and calling himself 'Sudden.'

Jim Green wanted to meet this Sudden personally over six-guns. Because Jim Green happened to be the real Sudden...

Other Sudden Westerns by Oliver Strange

SUDDEN—OUTLAWED

SUDDEN

SUDDEN PLAYS A HAND

SUDDEN—GOLDSEEKER

SUDDEN MAKES WAR

SUDDEN RIDES AGAIN

SUDDEN TAKES THE TRAIL

THE RANGE ROBBERS

THE LAW O' THE LARIAT

By Frederick H. Christian

SUDDEN STRIKES BACK

SUDDEN—TROUBLESHOOTER

SUDDEN AT BAY

SUDDEN—APACHE FIGHTER

SUDDEN—DEAD OR ALIVE!

and published by Corgi Books

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To
JAMES A. HARDEN, who died in France,
7th September. 1918

CHAPTER I

Out of a pale blue sky unflecked by the tiniest cloud, the sun, a disk of polished brass, blazed down, and perhaps for the fiftieth time the red-faced, grizzled driver of the stage-coach cursed it.

"If hell's any hotter'n this, damn me if I don't go an' get religion," he said to the express messenger who sat on the box beside him.

They were descending a narrow, winding defile, the weather-scarred, rock walls of which were bare save for scattered clumps of brush and cactus clinging precariously where an earth-filled crevice afforded root-hold, and the four wicked-eyed mules comprising the team required careful handling if the lumbering vehicle were to reach the end of the decline as a whole. None knew this better than Bill Eames, the driver; and though he talked, hands and eyes were concentrated on his job. Lurching, swaying, jolting over a rough road originally scoured out by torrents and enlivened by chunks of debris from the ridges on either side the coach went on, and presently, sweeping round a bend, the finish of the gully came in view. Eames eased his drag on the reins a little and gave a grunt of relief.

"Allus glad when I'm through Devil's Dip," he remarked. "Dunno why, but I got a feelin' that if anythin' does happen, it'll be here."

"Dandy place for a hold-up," said the messenger, who was making the trip for the first time.

"Yu said it," agreed the driver. "But we ain't never—"

"Stick 'em up, pronto," came the curt command.

With a curse, Eames flung all his weight on the lines, pulled his scared team to a standstill by main force and jammed his foot on the heavy brake. With a screech and a bump the coach stopped, and its driver, still holding the reins, promptly elevated his hands; he was not paid to fight. The express messenger was, and when his hands went up they gripped the gun which had lain across his thighs; it was loaded with buckshot, which would scatter, and was a deadly weapon at short range.

"Drop that, yu fool!"

The harsh voice appeared to come from a cluster of shrubs some ten yards away. It seemed to be the only cover near, and the guard, realizing that this was his sole chance against an unseen foe, fired plump into it. The roar of the report was instantly followed by the lesser detonation of a pistol-shot and the messenger slumped forward in his seat to sprawl across the footboard, his weapon hitting a wheel of the coach and bouncing into the roadway.

The driver, no stranger to scenes of violence, looked at the stricken man, saw the puncture in the forehead, with its tiny trickle of blood, and swore through his clenched teeth; and he did a good job, for when it comes to comprehensive and highly ornamental vituperation, your Western mule-skinner is gifted above his fellows. At the same time, risking a like fate, he dropped his arms and strove to subdue his mules, which, driven out of their senses by the shooting, were doing their level best to overturn the vehicle.

He was still busy with the task when a horseman emerged from the bushes. His face was masked by a common bandana handkerchief slitted for the eyes, further concealment being afforded by the pulled-down brim of a Stetson. In his right hand hung a revolver from the muzzle of which a wisp of blue smoke curled. He was mounted on a big black, with a white blaze between the eyes and a white stocking on the near foreleg.

"Don't try no tricks, driver," the unknown said, and though his voice had a hard, metallic ring, the mask muffled and disguised it "I'm sudden by nature as well as name." He paused for a moment as if to let the remark sink in, and then, "Tie yore lines. Whyfor did that fool fixe? I gave him his chance."

Eames, having got his team into subjection, looped the reins round the hook at his side and hoisted his hands again without delay. Even had he meditated making a dash for it, the avowed identity of the marauder would have negated the notion. So this was Sudden, the man whose wizard-like gun-play and daredevil exploits had made his

name a terror in the South-west. He did not doubt it; the ruthless slaying of the guard and the holding-up of the stage single-handed were in keeping with the outlaw's reputation. The rider paced leisurely up to the coach.

"Heave the box over," he ordered.

Eames reached down and from under the seat lately occupied by the murdered messenger drew out a small, iron-clamped chest which thudded deeply into the dust of the trail. The stranger nodded approvingly.

"Sounds good," he said, and then, "Go on prayin'."

He dismounted, and keeping a wary eye on the driver, raised the box and methodically tied it to the cantle of his saddle. Then he turned to the body of the coach.

"Yu can come out, keepin' yore paws up," he called.

Three passengers crept out from the dark interior and stood blinking in the glare of the sun. They were a sorry-looking trio. They had heard the shooting, the clatter of the messenger's gun as it fell, the curses of the driver, and had guessed the rest. Their trembling hands, thrust stiffly upwards, betrayed their fear. The outlaw surveyed them sardonically. Two were obviously drummers from the East, while the third, a man of middle age, dressed in shabby black with a soiled white collar, might have passed for a minister of some denomination, though his coarse, bloated face was hardly in keeping. It was to him the outlaw addressed himself.

"Parson, huh?" he asked.

"I am a poor servant of the Lord, brother," the man in black replied unctuously.

"An' a mighty poor one at that, I'm bettin'," was the sneering comment. "Well, yu oughta know how to take up a collection anyways—first thing yu fellas learn—so go through 'em, an' don't yu miss anythin' or yore flock'll be shy a shepherd."

He gestured with his pistol, and aware that protest would be futile, the man proceeded to despoil his fellow-passengers. The result was meagre enough; a small amount of currency and a little flash jewellery. Their grips, which the collector had to fetch from the coach and open, contained only clothing and samples. The road-agent shrugged his shoulders.

"Chicken-feed," he said, and pointed to several flat boxes in one of the grips. "What's them?"

The question awoke the business instinct in the quaking breast of the owner of the boxes. Possibly he hoped to placate this grim devil who might at any moment take it into his head to shoot them down.

"Say, sport," he quavered, "dat's de finest smokin' proposition ever offered in de West for two bits a t'row. Try one an' tell me if I'm a liar."

The outlaw took out one of the cigars, smelt it, broke it in two and flung it away.

"Yu shore are," he said, and kicked the pile of samples broadcast. Turning to the other commercial, he growled,

"What's yore line?"

"I sell soap," was the reply.

"Nobody'd never suspect yu of it," the outlaw said with heavy sarcasm, and faced round on the man in black.

"Cough up," he ordered.

"I have no worldly wealth, friend," that worthy replied.

"Yu got a friend here?" asked the other acidly.

His fierce eyes studied the self-styled minister keenly for a moment. Then, with a swift motion he holstered his pistol, seized the lapels of the black frock-coat, jerked them up, and down over the wearer's shoulders, thus pinioning his arms. The victim smothered an unclerical expression, and the road-agent laughed.

"I'm a good guesser," he rasped.

From under the left armpit of the "minister" peeped the butt of a double-barrelled Derringer, hung in a shoulder holster. The stranger drew it out.

"What's a man o' peace doin' with this?" he asked.

"I go into wild places an' carry it for my protection," replied the owner evenly.

The outlaw stuck the weapon in his own belt and began to pass his hands lightly over the other's clothing. A bulge in a pocket attracted him; it proved to be a pack of cards. The possessor's face did not alter, but his voice was sullen when he explained:

"I took them from a gambler."

The road-agent had squared the pack up on the palm of his hand, delicately, using the tips of his fingers only.

"Mebbe—it's a 'cold deck' anyways," he said. "We'll give it the 'loser's shuffle.'"

With a vigorous sweep of his arm he flung the pack skyward, scattering the cards far and wide, and then resumed his investigation. Another bulge produced a fat roll of bills, at the sight of which the searcher gave vent to a throaty laugh.

"Also took from a gambler, with the help o' the pack an' the pistol, I'm bettin'," he commented.

"It ain't mine; that's money collected for those in need," the passenger protested, but his face was flushed and there

was an evil glare in his eyes.

The road-agent laughed again. "It has shorely reached its destination, for I'm one of 'em, brother, an' I'm thankin' yu," he jeered. Then, as he read the expression on the other's face, his own voice took on an ugly edge. "Yu lyin' rat," he grated. "Did yu think yu could put it over me? Don't yu reckon I know a tin-horn cardsharp when I see one?"

"Damn yu, I'll get yu for this—I'll hunt yu down," screamed the "minister," and, beside himself at the loss of his money, he sprang at the outlaw.

Like a piston-rod the stranger's fist shot out and the man in black, driven headlong into the dust, lay there mouthing curses and threats. The masked man shrugged his shoulders contemptuously and turned to the other passengers.

"A poor loser," he commented. "Seein' yu boys ain't put up a yap, yu can keep yore pickin's." He swung up into the saddle. "All set, driver," he called. "Get agoin' when you want to, but I'll be with yu for a while though yu won't see me, an' I'm tellin' yu not to hurry. Sabe?"

"No need to hurry now," Eames retorted, and with another laugh the hold-up trotted round a bend and vanished in a thicket which bordered the trail.

Despite the parting threat the driver wasted no time. Lifting the body of the messenger, he tied it securely on the top of the coach, and then ordered his passengers aboard.

Having finished his arrangements, he clambered to his seat and cracked his long-lashed whip over the heads of the team. With a jerk that nearly threw the occupants from their places the coach resumed its interrupted journey. Only a few scattered cards and a broken cigar-box marked the spot where a man had died doing his duty.

CHAPTER II

How the town came to be called Lawless was not certainly known. A few of the dwellers therein, actuated by astonishing loyalty, claimed that it was christened after the first settler, while others, cynical citizens devoid of any proper pride in the place, held the name to be the fortunate fluke of one who could see into the future. The reputation of Lawless as one of the toughest towns in the territory undoubtedly supported this view.

In appearance it was typical of a hundred other early Western settlements—two jagged rows of crude erections facing one another across a wide strip of wheel-rutted, hoof-pounded dust. The buildings, squat, unlovely, were of timber or 'dobe, with a sprinkling of sod-walled and roofed dugouts, set in a sea of tin cans and other refuse. Along the front of these ran boarded sidewalks for pedestrians, and outside the saloons and stores hitch-rails were provided.

Sordid as it seemed. Lawless was yet the hub round which the life of the neighbouring ranches revolved, for the only other town within reasonable reach was Sweetwater, thirty miles eastward, from whence the traveller must take the coach north for the nearest railway point and civilization. Flung haphazard into the middle of a little plain, the site seemed unsuitable for a settlement, and yet it was not. The surrounding open country provided space and feed for occasional trail-herds and there was good water in the shape of Squaw Creek, which came down from the Tepee Mountain some six miles northwards.

That men lived there was known, and that was all. From time to time a stranger would drift into Lawless about dark, load up a pack-horse with supplies, sample the relaxations the town had to offer, and vanish before dawn.

Lawless asked no questions, taking the custom thankfully and minding its own business in strict accordance with the Western etiquette of that day.

Twenty-four hours after the robbery of the stage five men rode silently into Lawless and pulled up outside the Red Ace, the largest and most pretentious of the town's saloons. The visitors were cowpunchers, and the oldest, who appeared to be the leader, had the white metal star of a sheriff pinned to his vest. The first to dismount stretched himself with a sigh of relief.

"Seems like we bin ridin' a week," he said.

Four of the party vanished through the door of the saloon with all speed. Their leader laughed too, but remained outside, looking curiously at the form of a man sprawled carelessly across the sidewalk a few yards away. He could not see the face, for the big hat was tilted forward to keep off the glare of the sun, but from his build he judged the wearer to be young. The long legs stretched out before him, and the wide shoulders slumped against the saloon wall, seemed to indicate youth. The unknown was dressed in well-worn range-rig, and the holsters on either side of his sagging belt were empty.

"Canned, an' sleepin' it off," muttered the sheriff. "Hocked his guns too, durn young fool."

With a shrug of his broad shoulders he followed his men, failing to note the keen, appraising look which the object of his good-humoured contempt shot after him. He found his companions already draped against the bar, each

cuddling a glass. They welcomed him effusively.

"Hey, Strade, ain't yu thirsty no more? What's bin keepin' yu?" asked one.

"Stopped to scrape the mud off'n my boots," the sheriff grinned, with a glance at his dust-laden feet, and then, to the bartender, " 'Lo, Jude, how's tricks?"

"Town's 'bout dead since the spring round-up," the dispenser of drinks told him, pushing forward a bottle and glass.

"Never knowed it so quiet."

"Ca'm before the storm, mebbe," Strade said. "Yore marshal must be havin' quite a rest."

"Shore is—we planted him a week back," Jude explained. "That's three we've lost in less'n six months."

"Yo're mighty careless with marshals, ain't yu?" was Strade's comment. "Filled the vacancy yet?"

"Nope. There's bin no rush that yu'd notice," Jude grinned. "Bein' marshal in thisyer man's town ain't no pastime." Jude swabbed down the bar, mentally comparing the man before him with the late marshal of Lawless, and not to the latter's advantage. Strade's shortish, square, powerful frame and his rugged, good-humoured face with the clipped grey moustache indicated force and determination mingled with a sense of justice. He was both feared and liked in Sweetwater, where he had been sheriff for some years.

"Bin hearin' from the boys 'bout the stage robbery," the bartender remarked. "Sudden again, huh?"

"He named hisself, 'cordin' to Eames, an' the description o' the hoss tallies with that o' the chap who held up Sands, the Sweetwater store-keeper, a month back," the sheriff said. "Who's that fella layin' on the sidewalk?"

"Stray cowpunch, drifted in a coupla days ago," Jude told him. "Lapped up every cent he had an' hocked his artillery to get more. I had to throw him out this mornin' when he showed hostile."

"What sorta hoss does he ride?"

"Black—ain't a white hair on him. He can't be yore man, Strade, he ain't left town for forty-eight hours, nor drewed a sober breath neither. Yu won't find Sudden here."

"No strangers in town, eh?"

"On'y the specimen outside," Jude replied. "An', as I told yu, he's bin wedded to this bar pretty constant."

Meanwhile the "specimen" was arousing attention in another quarter. Soon after the sheriff had entered the saloon, a girl emerged from a store and tripped along the sun-drenched, sordid street. She walked with the easy swinging stride indicative of robust health and an outdoor life. Her neat shirt-waist and short divided skirt set off her slim figure to advantage. She pulled up abruptly when she came to the lounge on the sidewalk. For a moment she regarded the obstacle disgustedly and was about to step over it when a sudden decision firmed her pretty lips.

"I suppose I have to take the road," she said aloud.

At the cool, clear voice, the recumbent stranger opened his eyes, and under the brim of his hat saw a neat pair of high riding-boots fitted with dainty silver spurs. Grabbing his headgear with one hand, he looked up into the charming but rather scornful face of the wearer.

"I'm right sorry, ma'am," he stammered, and drew up his long legs so that she might proceed on her way.

Instead of doing so she stood still, and a gleam of pity shone in her deep brown eyes as she noted the empty belt. Drunken punchers she had seen before, but this one was so young—not over twenty-five, she reflected, little more than a boy. She herself was nearing twenty. He had the slim waist and broad shoulders of an athlete, and his face showed no traces of dissipation. On the contrary, it was a strong face, she decided, and not unattractive, despite its unshaven condition; the lean, square jaw and level eyes bespoke determination above the ordinary; there were possibilities in such a man.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" she asked, after an awkward pause.

"I shore am, ma'am," drawled the culprit. "Blockin' the trail thisaway is certainly scand'lous."

Sitting there, hugging his knees, a grin on his upturned face, he looked like a mischievous youngster. She had hard work not to smile, but instead she said reprovingly:

"I wasn't referring to that. I meant for being—" She paused confusedly.

"Drunk," he assisted, and the engaging grin was again evident. "Don't yu mind my feelin's—the barkeep inside didn't when he threw me out on my ear, though I've spent near enough in there the last two-three days to buy the hull shebang. Drink is a shore deceiver; it lifts a fella up, but it sets him down again mighty hard."

"Knowing that, then why do you do it?" she naturally asked.

"Yu got me guessin'," he smiled. "I reckon men is like hosses—even the steadiest will buck once in a while, sorta temp'rary rebellion 'gainst the thusness o' things, yu sabe? Now I've put up my kick, I'll get me a job an' be a respectable citizen for a piece."

She had a suspicion that he was amusing himself, and her next remark was a little ironical.

"Oh, you do work?"

"Shorely," he grinned. "I got a healthy appetite to provide for."

She smiled too at this, and then, as she glanced down the street, he saw a little more colour steal into her cheeks. A

tall, rather carefully-clad young cowpuncher was swinging along towards them. The girl prepared to depart.

"If you come to the Double S my uncle might be able to use you," she said.

"I'm obliged to you," the man said. "If I don't get the job I'm after, I'll shore remember that."

With a little nod she went on her way and his eyes followed her with a gleam of admiration. The new-comer's greeting was an elaborate sweep of his sombrero, and after chatting for a moment, they turned and went along the street together.

"She's certainly soothin' to the sight," the prostrate puncher murmured. "An' it looks like yu may be lucky, Mister Man, whoever yu are. She'll be Miss Antonia Sarel, o' course."

The door of the saloon opened, the posse from Sweetwater came out, and, humorously bewailing their fate, took saddle again. The sheriff followed their example, after one contemptuous glance at the hunched-up figure on the sidewalk. The latter watched until the visitors, with a shrill cowboy yell, vanished in a cloud of dust.

"Good huntin', sheriff," he muttered, for through the open window of the saloon he had heard the story of the stage robbery. "Wonder what yu'd 'a' said if I'd claimed to be Sudden? Called me a liar, I betcha, seein' I was in the Red Ace when the hold-up happened. But it would 'a' been the sober truth alla-same, though I ain't the man yo're lookin' for; he's Sudden the Second, an' I'm hopin' to meet him my own self." He climbed unsteadily to his feet, staggered round the corner of the building, and straightened up. "Guess I got this burg thinkin' what I want it to, but We'll play the hand right out," he continued. "Mebbe that jasper is still hankerin' for my hoss."

Dropping his shoulders, he lurched away to the corral behind the saloon. Here he found a short, stocky rancher saddling a horse, and studying the other animals in the enclosure. One of them, a big, rangy, black mustang seemed to get most of his attention. He looked up as the cowpuncher approached.

"Changed yore mind 'bout sellin'?" he asked, with a twinkle in his good-humoured eyes.

"Nope, but I'll gamble with yu," the puncher replied. "Yu put up fifty bucks agin the hoss an' we'll cut the cards—highest wins. What yu say?"

The rancher considered the proposition for a moment. He was a lover of horses, and he wanted the animal, but Andrew Bordene, of the Box B ranch, was a man of slow decisions. Cheap as good horseflesh was, he knew the black was worth twice the figure named. To give himself time, he asked a question:

"I don't know the brand. Where'd yu get him?"

"From a fella who caught him in Texas. I took him wild, broke him myself, an' branded him J. G.—my name bein' James Green," the cowpuncher told him. "Nigger is a good hoss."

He whistled, and the black came trotting to the corral bars and rubbed his velvety muzzle against his master's outstretched hand. Bordene hesitated no longer; he liked a gamble, and this was all in his favour. Still, if the puncher wanted the money...

"I'll go yu," he said, and diving into a pocket, produced a pack of cards.

The puncher shuffled them carelessly and held them out for his opponent to cut. Bordene's card was the knave of diamonds; Green cut the ten of hearts.

"I lose," he said, with a cheerful grin. "Say, I got a saddle an' bridle that set me back a hundred and twenty in Tucson not too long ago. I'll put 'em up against the hoss if you're willin'?"

The rancher nodded, shuffled, and proffered the pack. A look of relief appeared on the puncher's face when he turned up the queen of spades, only to vanish again when Bordene showed the king of diamonds. Nevertheless, he laughed.

"That busts me wide open," he said, and then, "No, it don't, mebbe. See here, the round-up'll be comin' along an' yu'll want more help. I'll stake two months o' my time against the saddle an' bridle. I know cattle."

Bordene looked at him in surprise, almost suspecting a jest; but though the puncher was grinning he was quite in earnest. Somehow, the rancher's heart warmed to this gay loser.

"I'm trustin' yu—like yu did me," he responded. "That deck might 'a' been phony."

"Shucks!" was the reply. "I know a white man when I see one."

The play was resumed. The puncher won the first cut, lost the next, and then won the two following, thus regaining both saddle and horse. He looked quizzically at his opponent.

"We ain't got nowhere," he remarked. "One more flip, fifty cash against the hoss, to finish it."

He cut and displayed the three of spades.

"Poor luck, friend," said the older man. "I'm thinkin' yu've lost yore mount."

With a grin of commiseration and confident of success he exposed his own card. His face changed with ludicrous rapidity as he saw it: he had cut the two of spades.

"Well, may I be teetotally damned if yu don't win!" he cried regretfully, and then his eyes twinkled. "No matter. I like the way yu play, an' if yo're huntin' a job in these parts come an' see me at the Box B."

"I certainly will, seh," the cowpuncher smiled. "I like the way yu lose."

He took the money the other tendered and waved a farewell as the rancher swung into the saddle and loped for the trail. Then he smiled contentedly. He knew the story would get around, and that he would be regarded as a stray puncher, who, having overdone his spree, had to risk losing his horse to rehabilitate himself.

"Reckon that will blind my tracks aplenty," he muttered, and made his way to the Red Ace.

The saloon was empty, save for the bartender, whose face at once assumed a surly expression when he recognized the visitor. Green walked to the bar, slammed down a twenty-dollar gold piece, and said sharply:

"Gimme my guns."

With some uneasiness of mind, Jude produced the pawned weapons—two forty-fives, the almost black walnut butts of which showed signs of much use.

"Whisky," came the next order, as the cowboy, examining the guns to make sure they were still loaded, thrust them into his holsters.

Jude pushed forward bottle and glass, concealing his satisfaction. The fellow would get soaked again and the guns would soon return behind the bar. He knew these range-riders; if they had a taste for liquor they would spend their last peso to satisfy it. With a saturnine smile he watched the customer pour his drink and raise the glass to his nose. Then the spirit was coolly tipped out on the sanded floor.

"Hey, yu, what's the matter with my whisky?" asked the astonished and outraged supplier of the drink.

"Didn't you take for it?" asked the customer; and when the other sullenly nodded, "then that makes it my whisky, don't it?—an' shorely a fella can do what he likes with his own."

The barkeeper could not refute the argument; this cold-eyed, firm-jawed person was a very different proposition from the limp, drink-sodden bum he had so unceremoniously flung out a few hours before. Pushing forward a coin from the change lying before him, the cowboy poured himself another dose. This he also smelt, then took a mouthful, rolling the liquor around his tongue before finally spitting it out.

"You see, fella, it can be did," he remarked to the astounded Jude. "Of Man Booze can be beat. Yu wanta get yore think-box workin' an' reorganize yore ideas some. Sabe?"

He strolled casually out of the saloon, leaving an almost petrified bartender giving a lifelike impersonation of a newly-caught codfish. After a visit to the barber, Green purchased a new shirt and kerchief, which he donned in the room behind the store, and emerged looking and feeling a very different individual. There were still some hours of daylight remaining, and having nothing else to do, he sauntered along to the eastern end of the town, which was also the Mexican quarter. Passing a dumpy adobe building, which he rightly guessed to be a drinking dive, he heard his own tongue.

"Well, yu got me fixed. Go ahead an' finish it, yu scum."

Noiselessly pushing open the swing-door he saw a curious sight. In the centre of the earthen floor a short, stout cow-puncher was standing, his gun out. In front of him, right and left, were two Mexicans with drawn knives. Behind him, leaning over the rough wooden bar, was another, an older man, who had a shotgun trained on the cowboy's back. Green entered just in time to see the hand of the fellow on the left flash up, and promptly fired. The bullet, shattering the thrower's elbow, spoiled his aim and sent the knife thudding into the front of the bar, where it quivered, winking wickedly in the sunlight.

"Drop it," Green said sharply to the other knife expert, and when the weapon tinkled on the floor and its owner had frozen into immobility, he turned to the man at the bar. "Push that gun over an' hoist yore paws, pronto!"

The command was obeyed with ludicrous promptitude. Green looked at the puncher.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

"Friend, yo're as welcome as a fourth ace—these skunks shore had me cold," was the reply. "I was in here yestiddy, an' I don't just remember what happened. S'pose they hoccussed my liquor. This mornin' I wakes up with a head like a balloon, way out on the desert under a mesquite, an' my roll was missin'. I walks in, an' nacherally calls to enquire. Bein' hoppin' mad, I don't look at my gun first; o' course, they'd drawed the shells an' if yu hadn't happened along I reckon I'd be tryin' to twang a harp about now. An' I never had no ear for music," he finished whimsically.

"Which of 'em, would yu say, has yore mazuma?" Green asked.

"They was all here, but I'm guessin' the old piker has it—he's the boss, the other two are just relations," the puncher explained.

Green looked at the proprietor. "Ante up," he said. "If this hombre don't get his roll, I'll have to ask yore widow about it."

"To be or not to be," amigo," grinned the little puncher, busy stuffing cartridges into his gun.

Green looked at him in surprise and then chuckled inwardly. The Mexican, his beady eyes full of hate, reached into a drawer beneath the bar and threw out a roll of bills secured by a rubber band, the while he jabbered a string of excuses. The señor had been seized with illness; he had taken care of the money lest the señor be robbed; it would have been returned in due course; it was only a joke...

"Yore brand o' humour'll get yu fitted with a wooden suit one o' these fine days," Green grimly warned him, as he backed out of the door the puncher was holding ajar. They stood without for a moment, waiting, but there was no demonstration from the dive. As they turned up the street the rescued man said quietly:

"I'm obliged to yu."

"Shucks! Nothin' to that," Green returned hastily. "I'm bettin' that, like myself, yo're a stranger hereabouts."

"Yeah, drifted in coupla days back—just moseyin' round the country," explained the other. "I'm stayin' here; what about comin' in for a pow-wow?"

He had halted before an unpretentious log and shingle two-storey building, above the door of which a rudely-lettered board announced, "Durley's Rest House. Good Food and Likker." Green read the notice and smiled.

"I hope he cooks better'n he spells," he said.

"Shore does, an' I reckon he's square at that," responded the stranger, as he thrust open the door.

CHAPTER III

The bar they entered was small but neat and clean. A man of middle age, with a round, red, jovial face greeted the smaller of the pair with a reproving shake of the head.

"Yore bed don't appear to 'a' bin used any last night," he said. "Sleepin' out in thisyer town ain't supposed to be healthy. No business o' mine, o' course, but—" He pushed forward the customary bottle and glasses. The little puncher shuddered visibly at the sight of them.

"Not if yu paid me, ol'-timer," he said earnestly. "I'm feelin' like a warmed-up corpse right now."

"Yu look it," the landlord told him. "Been to Miguel's, I s'pose? Yo're old enough to know better."

"I do know better, but I went there—wanted suthin with a kick in it." He grinned ruefully. "I got the kick awright, on my head from the way she aches. If you had a cup o' strong coffee now—" He looked enquiringly at Green.

"Coffee sounds good to me too," that young man replied. In a few moments they were seated at one of the small tables, and the rescuer had an opportunity to study the man whose life he had probably saved. The round, plump face, with its twinkling eyes and generous mouth suggested good-humour, and there was strength in the squat figure and slightly-bowed legs. Despite the fact that he must have passed the mid-thirties his manner showed the irresponsibility of a boy. He swallowed half the cup of thick, black beverage the landlord had just put before him. "That's the stuff," he said appreciatively. "Now, s'pose we get acquainted; my name is Barsay, but my friends call me—"

"Tubby?" queried the other, with a grin.

The little man stopped rolling a cigarette and stared in open-mouthed astonishment. Then he grinned too.

"Hell! I was goin' to say 'Pete,'" he pointed out. "How'd yu guess 'bout that infernal nickname?"

"You told me yoreself—back there in the dive," Green smiled. "'To be or not to be,' yu said, an', lookin' at yu, it was easy to find the answer."

The other man raised his hands in ludicrous despair. "Awright, I'll be good," he said. "Yu see, it's thisaway. Years back, I'm punchin' for the Bar 9 in Texas, an' I go to see a play by a fella named Shakespeare. That bit of it sticks in my noddle, but every while or so she slips out through my mouth. The boys plastered the name on me, an' I can't lose it. I reckon," he added sadly, "she does kinda fit my figure."

"Shore does," Green laughed; "but I wouldn't worry. That same fella, Shakespeare, also says, 'What's in a name?' Mine is Green, but I've been told I don't look it."

"An' that's terrible true," Barsay grinned. "If yu got any other I'm aimin' to use it."

"I answer to 'Jim' when the right fella says it," came the reply. "What yu doin' in this prairie-dog's hole of a town?"

"Well, I've punched cows from the Border to Montana an' back again. I s'pose I'd be chasin' a job right now if you hadn't rescued my roll for me."

"I've done considerable harassin' o' beef my own self, an' I want a change."

"This is cattle country."

"Shore it is, but I hear there's a vacancy for a town marshal."

The little man sat up suddenly. "Sufferin' serpents!" he cried. "Yu must be tired o' life; marshals here don't last as long as a dollar in a cowboy's pocket. Say, if yo're as broke as that, half o' what I got is yores."

"Thank yu, but I ain't busted, an' I come here a-purpose to land the job," the other told him. "What's more, I got my eye on the deputy I want—short, fat fella, 'bout yore size."

"Take that eye off," gasped the "fat fella." "Me a deputy? Why, I wouldn't fit nohow. I've bin a hold-up, hoss-thief, rustler—"

"I knowed I was right," Green interrupted. "Yu got all the qualifications. 'Set a thief to catch a thief,' they say. Yo're

shore elected, amigo."

Barsay shrugged resignedly. "Why didn't yu let them Greasers finish?" he asked plaintively. Then his face brightened. "But yu ain't roped her yet," he added.

"I'm goin' to," Green said confidently. "Point is, how do we go about it?"

Barsay called the landlord over. "Hey, Durley, my friend here is hot on bein' marshal o' this burg. What's his best move?"

The innkeeper's face lost its jovial expression. "His best move is to fork a cayuse an' ride straight ahead till he forgets the notion," he said seriously. "Bein' marshal o' Lawless is just plain soocide." He saw that his advice would not be taken and added, "Well, 'The Vulture' is the king-pin; if he gives it yu, the job's yores."

"That's Raven—who runs the Red Ace, huh?" Green asked. "Is he white?"

"Claims to be on his father's side, though I reckon it's on'y Mex white at that," Durley replied. "His mother was a Comanche squaw."

"Whyfor the fancy name?" asked Barsay.

"Chap Seth had treated mean give it him," Durley explained. "Said a vulture was the on'y sort o' bird he resembled. Yu don't wanta overlook no bets when yo're dealin' with him."

"Guess I'll call on the gent right now; I'm needin' that job," Green said. "Yu stay put, Pete," he added, as Barsay rose. "Back soon."

He went out, and Durley's eyes followed him reflectively. "Knowed yore friend long?" he enquired.

"Never seed him till 'bout an hour ago, but, believe me, I met him at the right mink," the plump puncher replied, and proceeded to tell of his recent predicament.

Meanwhile the subject of their conversation had reached and entered the Red Ace; the expression on the bartender's face was still anything but a welcome. Nevertheless he reached for a bottle. The customer waved it away.

"Yo're pullin' the wrong card, ol'timer," he grinned. "Business before pleasure is my motto; I wanta see Mister Raven."

"What for?" came the surly question.

The grin disappeared from the puncher's face. "If yu'd do I wouldn't be askin' for yore boss," he said acidly.

Jude's bluster left him. Sullenly he went to a door marked "Private," stuck his head in for a moment, and then beckoned to the visitor. Green stepped into what was evidently the saloonkeeper's office. It was plainly furnished with, a desk, several chairs, a safe, and a shelf for books. Seth Raven was sitting at the desk. He was about forty, and looked it. Slight of frame, his hunched shoulders made him appear shorter than he really was and threw his head forward into a curiously bird-like attitude, the impression being accentuated by a hooked nose, small, close-set eyes, thin lips, and lank, black hair. His yellow skin seemed tight-stretched over the high cheek-bones.

"Injun an' Mex or bad white, like Durley said, reg'lar devil's brew," was Green's unvoiced criticism.

"Well, what vu want?" Raven asked curtly.

The puncher leaned nonchalantly against the door, his thumbs hooked in his belt. "I'm told this burg is shy a marshal," he said. "I'm shy a job, an' there yu have it."

The saloon-keeper studied him in silence for a moment. He knew the applicant's history from the time he had arrived, including the incident of the wasted whisky and the affair at Miguel's. Little happened in Lawless that did not come to the ears of The Vulture sooner or later—generally sooner.

"We don't know nothin' about yu," he said.

"My name is James Green, o' Texas, an' lately I've been livin' mostly under my hat," the puncher told him.

"Which don't make us much wiser," was Raven's comment.

"Yore last marshal, Perkins, lit outa Nevada a flea's jump ahead o' the Vigilantes, an' Dawlish, the man afore him, had been in the pen for cattle-rustlin'. Ain't yu gettin' a mite particular?" Green asked sardonically.

The saloon-keeper's thin lips lengthened, which was his nearest approach to a smile. He had not expected to get any details of the fellow's past, and in reality he cared little. Lawless was a sanctuary for the law-breaker, and only a man of that type could hope to keep any semblance of order. The puncher's lean, hard face, level eyes, and firm lips were not those of a weakling.

"Yore kind o' young," Raven objected.

"Suffered from that since I was born," Green said lightly. "The doctors say I'll grow out of it. Well, what's the word?"

"The pay is two hundred dollars a month," the other said.

"Which ain't over generous," Green commented.

"An' pickin's, the same bein'—to the right man—considerable," Raven slowly added.

"With another hundred for a deputy," the puncher suggested, and when the saloon-keeper shook his head, "See here, I ain't a machine; there's times when I wanta sleep some."

"Awright, a deputy goes. Yu better pick a good one an' tell him to shoot first an' argue afterwards," Raven said. He dipped into a drawer of the desk. "It so happens I got a coupla stars, an' here's the key to yore quarters." Handing the articles to Green, he dismissed the new officer with a curt "See yu later."

For a little while Raven sat thinking, weighing up the man who had just left him. He recognized that Green was not the ordinary type of desperado; his cool, smiling confidence contrasted oddly with the blustering, bullying attitude of the average gun-fighter.

"A useful fella if he comes to heel—an' if he don't—" His lips twisted in a sneer. "But there's a sheriff somewheres who'd be glad to meet him."

And in this he was entirely right.

When Green returned to the Rest House he found the bar empty, save for Barsay sprawling in a chair with his feet on a table and snoring lustily. The marshal's face became that of an imp of mischief. Gently he pinned one of the stars he had received to the sleeping man's vest, and pulling one of his guns, fired into the floor. The violence of the slumberer's awaking start flung him to the ground but in a second he was on his feet, gun out, and eyes glaring. A moment later Durley came flying into the bar, only to find Green, weak with laughter, a smoking gun in his hand, leaning against the wall.

"Yu natural damn fool," the victim admonished, when he realized the joke. "Mighta broke my blamed neck."

"No fear—that's slated for a rope," Green retorted. "Fine deputy-marshal yu are—caught nappin' right away."

Barsay then noticed the decoration he had unconsciously acquired and his eyes widened. "Yu got it?" he cried, and when his new friend nodded, he turned to Durley and said, "Well, what d'yu know about that, huh?"

"I shore hope yu got a month's pay in advance," the landlord replied. "It's about yore one chance to draw any."

"Mother's cheery little comforter, ain't yu?" Green grinned. "Yu oughta be in the undertakin' business."

Durley laughed too, and then his face grew serious again. "Puttin' jokes aside, gents, I shore wish yu all the luck there is, but yu'll have to watch cases mighty close," he warned.

"We'er aimin' to do that same," the marshal assured him. "An' we're reckonin' on one friend anyways."

"You can reckon on more than that," the landlord said. "Quite a few of us would like this town to have a better reputation, but o' course, if yo're goin' to run with The Vulture—"

"I cut my own trail, ol'-timer," Green told him. "Say, Pete, what about takin' possession of our new home? Raven gave me the key."

The official quarters of the town marshal were situated alongside the Red Ace, and consisted of a one-storey 'dobe hut. Over the door was a board with the single word "Marshal" painted in large letters. This was sadly pockmarked by bullets; evidently festive visitors were in the habit of testifying their contempt for the law by peppering the outward and visible sign of its presence. Green surveyed the battered board sardonically and unlocked the door. The room they entered was clearly the office, scantily furnished with an old desk, three somewhat decrepit chairs, and a cupboard. Behind it was another containing two pallet-beds; adjoining it, but reached by a narrow passage from the office, was a third room, empty save for a bench, with a massive, padlocked door and small barred window.

Continuing their investigations, they found a side-door in the passage which led into a board shack containing a broken-down stove, a ditto chair, and a few battered culinary utensils.

"Don't think much o' the kitchen—we'll have to do most of our feedin' at Durley's," the marshal said. "I allus did hate cookin' anyways."

"Same here," responded his assistant. "This show won't be so bad once we got her tidied up an' our war-bags fetched in. We're nice an' handy to the boss," he finished, with a sly look at the other.

Green rose at the bait instantly. "See here, fella, bosses don't go with me, not any," he said acidly. "If that Vulture person thinks he can ride me he's got another guess comin'. Yu get that into the knob you hang yore hat on."

Barsay laughed delightedly at his success in drawing his chief. "Partner, I like yu most to death," he chortled. "I had an idea yu weren't exactly saddle-broke, but I wanted to be shore."

Whereupon Green joined in the laugh against himself and they departed in search of their belongings.

CHAPTER IV

"I certainly was lucky to catch yu in town to-day, Tonia," Andy Bordene remarked, as they jogged slowly along the trail. "It seems ages since I saw you."

The girl's eyes twinkled. "Yes, the Double S must be a good two hours' ride from the Box B," she said demurely.

The young man sensed the mild sarcasm and flushed. "I have to work for my livin' nowadays, Tonia," he defended.

"Yu've no notion what a driver the old man is, an' we're short-handed at that."

"You ought not to be, when there are likely punchers in town with nothing better to do than swallow the poison sold at the Red Ace," she retorted, and went on to tell of her recent encounter with the stranger cowboy. Bordene smiled. "Any puncher is apt to slip over the edge now an' then; I'll look him up when I get back to town." He shot a mischievous glance at her. "Mebbe it would be wiser to have him at the Box B."

The girl returned the look. She knew he was teasing her—it was an old trick of his—but this time she suspected a gravity under the playful words.

"Andy, you are a chump," she said, and smiled sweetly. "But you are a nice chump."

The Double S ranch lay some fifteen miles south-east of Lawless and about half-way between that town and Sweetwater, though not on the direct route. For the most part, the trail to it passed over the open range. At one point, however, it cut through a strip of broken country which jutted out like a great finger into the grassland, dipping down between the tree and brush-clad walls of a ravine. After the scorching sunshine of the open, the shade of the overhanging foliage was a welcome relief, and, therefore, Bordene was astonished when his companion spurred her mount and rocketed through the gorge at full speed. Wondering what was the matter, he did likewise, catching her up just as she emerged on the open plain again. She slowed down and turned to him, a somewhat shamed expression on her flushed face.

"I'm sorry, Andy," she said. "I dread that place, and I just cannot dawdle through it. If you hadn't been here I'd have gone round, though it's miles out of the way. Cowardly, I know, but you understand, don't you?"

He nodded, and his eyes were suddenly tender. Of course he understood, and it was not difficult, remembering that less than a twelvemonth before, Anthony Sard, her father, had been foully done to death somewhere in the ravine. Both he and Tonia had been away at college, but he knew that the rancher had been bushwhacked—shot in the back from ambush—and his slayer had never been discovered. The girl had returned home to find Reuben Sarel, her father's only brother, in charge of the ranch. For some time they rode in silence and then, as though she had been screwing up her courage, Tonia turned impulsively to her companion.

"Andy, would you be hurt if I asked you not to spend so much time at the Red Ace?" she asked.

"Who's been talkin'?" he countered.

"Oh, little birds chirp, you know," she replied lightly.

"Some little birds oughta have their little necks twisted," he replied. "Just because a fella drops into a place now an' again for a drink an' a game they figure he's headin' for hell right away."

"Is it only now and again, Andy?" she queried. "And isn't it true you have lost a lot at poker lately?"

"I've dropped a bit," he admitted. "Dad keeps me pretty close-hauled, but I'll get it back, an' Seth ain't in no hurry."

"I don't like that man—he makes me shudder," she said. "Whenever I meet him I think of something I saw years ago when I was a kid."

"Not so awful many years ago," smiled the boy.

She refused to be put off. "I was out riding with Dad and we came upon a poor little dead calf," she went on.

"Perched on the carcass was a great black bird, its claws embedded in the body and its cruel beak tearing away the flesh. Ugh! It was horrible!"

Bordene laughed at her. "Well, they call him The Vulture, but he ain't a bad old scout," he replied. "Fella can't help his looks, yu know, an' he's too big a man in these parts to tangle with. Yore uncle thinks a lot of him."

"I know, but—"

She left the sentence unfinished, loth to admit distrust of her only relation, even to Andy. For the truth was that though she was fond of Reuben Sarel, and believed that he sincerely cared for her, she recognized his limitations, knew that he was weak, and that his great bulk inclined him to laziness. In the hands of a man like Raven... Presently they reached the long, easy slope which wound up to the top of the little mesa where stood the Double S. It was a big place, the bunk-house, barns, store-houses, and corrals all constructed on a generous scale. The ranch-house, though of one storey only, was roomy. Solidly built of shaped logs and adobe bricks, it had a broad, covered veranda which overlooked the trail. In some ways the location was not a happy one, but the presence of a perpetual spring of cold, sweet water, in a land where that liquid was sometimes more precious than gold, compensated for other disadvantages. Three giant cottonwoods, survivors of the grove cut down when the buildings were erected, cast a welcome shade and relieved the bareness of the surroundings.

Lounging in a chair in a protected corner of the veranda, puffing a long black cigar, Reuben Sarel watched the approaching riders. Of middle age, his big, round, fleshy face, in which the tiny eyes twinkled, was so fashioned as to present a perpetual expression of good-humour, but there was a slackness and want of decision about the mouth which told a story; here was one who would take the easy way. His enormous breadth of body, coupled with his corpulency, made him appear almost as wide as he was long. With astonishing agility for so massive a man, he jumped up and waved to the girl and her companion as they loped up.

"Lo, Andy, what's brung yu over?" he asked, with a grin which uncovered his strong, tobacco-stained teeth. "Light

an' tell us the news."

"Just had to see Tonia safe home, but I can't stay," the young man smiled, as he dismounted and trailed the reins.

"Heard about the Sweetwater stage bein' held up?"

"Yu don't say!" ejaculated the other. "When was it?"

"Yesterday mornin' in Devil's Dip. Strade an' his posse was in lookin' for the fella."

"The fella? One-man job, huh? Did he get anythin'?"

"He got the messenger—plumb through the head, the express box with ten thousand, an' one o' the passengers claims he lost two thousand more."

"Pretty good haul," Sard said. "Strade got anythin' to go on? Fella didn't look anyways like me, I s'pose?"

"I guess not," Bordene assured him. "Eames, the driver, said the hold-up claimed to be Sudden, an' the hoss tallied."

Sarel's small eyes widened. "Hell!" he exploded. "That jasper's gettin' too prevalent in these parts; it's time somebody put a crimp in his game."

The talk drifted to range topics, and presently Andy climbed his horse again, and, with a wave of his hat, set out for Lawless. He rode slowly, his mind full of the girl from whom he had just parted. Ever since they could toddle they had been playmates, like brother and sister. School and college days for both of them had intervened, and when these were over the relationship had become one of good comrades. But something had happened today. Was it a sudden realization of her budding, youthful beauty as she rode so jauntily beside him, or the fact that she had shown interest in another man? He did not know, but he was acutely conscious that he wanted her, that his feeling was no longer one of mere friendship. He decided that he would employ this stranger, and would see to it that his duties did not take him to the Double S.

"Wonder who told her 'bout the Red Ace?" he muttered. "Durn it, I'll not go there so much, though I gotta to-night—it's the likeliest spot to find that fella."

Having thus, with the easy casuistry of youth, justified himself, he shook a little life into the heels of his horse and hurried to the place he had determined to avoid.

* * *

The dusk was creeping in from mountain and desert and Lawless was waking up for the evening's festivities. From the south-west trail came the muffled thunder of pounding hoofs as a party of four cowboys dashed into the street, riding and yelling like madmen. The light in the marshal's office arrested their attention at once and they pulled their ponies to a stop, squattering the dust in every direction.

"Merciful Moses, they got a new marshal!" cried one. "Smoke him up, boys."

With the words he snatched out his six-shooter and sent a hail of bullets into the signboard over the officer's door. His companions followed his example, and having thus evidenced their contempt for the law, and "run a blazer" on its representative, they emitted a derisive shout and rode on to the Red Ace. Inside the office the marshal and his deputy were straightening up. They heard the tattoo of the bullets, and from the side of the window Green watched the riders. Pete's face plainly disapproved of his superior's inactivity.

"Ain't yu goin' to expostulate none with them playful people?" he asked.

Green grinned at him quizzically. "Shucks, they're on'y boys from the Box B," he said. There had been just light enough for him to read the brand on the flank of the nearest pony. "Wasn't yu ever young an' wishful to let off steam on a night out?"

"Awright, gran'pop, but they're countin' it a score agin yu," retorted the little man.

"Betcha five dollars they apologize 'fore the night's out," the marshal offered. "An' anyway, that sign needs repaintin'."

Pete took the bet, not that he felt sure of winning it—for he was beginning to realize that this new friend of his was an uncommon person—but because he was a born gambler, and curious. As to what the condition of the sign had to do with it, he could form no conjecture.

Their entry, a little later, into the bar of the Red Ace aroused small interest in the crowded room. Here and there a card-player looked up, muttered something in an undertone, and went on playing.

The Box B boys, seated at a table near the bar with a bottle between them, took no notice until a whisper reached their ears that it was the new marshal who had come in. Then heads went together, and presently one of them, a merry-looking youth whose red hair and profusely-freckled face had earned him the name of "Rusty," rose amid the laughter of the other three.

Green was alone, leaning against the bar, his deputy being a few yards away, watching the play at a poker-table.

The Box B rider lurched up, planted himself so that he faced his quarry, and, with a wink at his companions, opened the conversation.

"Is it true yo're the new marshal?" he asked.

"It's a solemn fact, seh," Green replied gravely.

The young man teetered on his heels, eyeing the officer truculently. Had he been a little less under the influence of liquor he would have recognized that this quiet, lazy-looking man was not one to take liberties with.

"Me an' my friends don't like marshals nohow—can't see any need for 'em," he pursued. "But if we gotta have one 'simportant to make shore he's good, yu unnerstan'? I've made a li'l wager I c'n beat yu to the draw." He suddenly crouched, his right hand hovering over his weapon. "Flash it!" he cried.

Hardly had the words left his lips when a gun-barrel jolted him rudely in the stomach, while his hand, clawing at his holster, found it empty. Looking down, he saw that the marshal's weapons were still in his belt and that the gun now threatening his internal economy was his own. Instantly the drink died out as he realized that the man he had dared possessed every right to blow him into eternity. His companions started up in alarm.

"Don't shoot, marshal, he was on'y joshin'," one of them called out.

"Do yu still think yu can beat me to it?" the marshal asked, and without waiting for a reply slipped the borrowed pistol back into its place. "If yu do, well, have another try."

There was a sardonic smile on his lips, but his eyes were friendly, and the beaten man was now sober enough to see it. He achieved a difficult grin.

"Not any more for me, thank yu all the same," he said. "I ain't a hawg, an' I wanta say I'm sorry we shot up yore shingle this evenin'."

Green's eyes twinkled. "Shucks! a coat o' paint'll put that right," he said meaningly.

Rusty looked at his friends. "We shore owe him that," he suggested. "I'm stayin' in town to-night, boys, an' it's up to me."

After a round of drinks the Box B party returned to its game, and Green found his deputy beside him. Pete's wide grin moved the marshal to mirth.

"If it warn't for yore ears that smile would go clean round yore haid," he commented.

Barsay ignored the insult and produced a five-dollar bill. "Which yu shore earned it, yu ol' he-wizard," he said. "How d'yu work it?"

"All done by kindness," Green told him. "Hello! who's wantin' me now?"

Andy, who had just entered the saloon, was heading straight for the marshal. He plunged at once into his business.

"I'm Bordene o' the Box B, an' I'm supposin' you're the man Miss Sarel spoke to this afternoon," he began, and when Green nodded; "If yo're still huntin' that job—"

"I'm obliged to her, an' yu, but—" the marshal flipped aside his vest, disclosing his badge.

The young man's eyebrows rose. "Yo're the new marshal?" he asked, and then he smiled. "Congratulations," he added.

"Thank yu, seh," Green smiled back. "Yo're the first; the others just asked which was my favourite flower."

"Well, Lawless certainly takes a whole man to ride her, but I wish yu luck, an' if yu want help, yu'll find it at the Box B," Andy replied.

The marshal thanked him, and meant it; Bordene might have all the recklessness and inexperience of youth, but the stuff of which good men are made was there also. The Box B boys greeted their young boss with a familiarity that showed he was one of them.

"Say, Andy, don't yu get to presumin' any with that marshal fella; he's a friend of ours, an' bad medicine to fool with. Yo're liable to lose out: ask Rusty," said one.

"This fella's white," the culprit confessed. "I sized him up all wrong. I'm stayin' in town to-night."

The young rancher nodded, and then, hearing his name called, turned to find Seth Raven, with a stranger. The latter had ridden into town during the afternoon and had at once proceeded to the Red Ace. Raven, seated in his office, did not welcome the visitor too effusively.

"'Lo, Parson, what yu wantin'?" he asked.

"A stake, Seth," the man in shabby black replied. "That damned hold-up skunk cleaned me out. But I'll get him, curse his thievin' hide, if I spend the rest o' my life at it."

He snarled the words out savagely, and his little eyes gleamed with hatred. The saloon-keeper's thin lips curled contemptuously as he replied, "Better forget it, Parson; yu'd stand one hell of a chance against Sudden, wouldn't yu?"

"I'll get him," the other repeated doggedly. "But to do that I gotta live. What about it?"

"Oh, I'll stake yu," Raven returned carelessly, as he took a wad of bills out of a drawer, counted, and passed them over. "I'm givin' yu a word o' warnin'; Lawless has got its growth an' won't stand for any raw stuff, see? Also, what I say goes around here, an' I won't stand for it neither."

The gambler sensed the covert threat in both words and tone. He knew that by accepting the money he had made himself the creature of this hunched-up, malignant devil, but he did not care; he was not a squeamish person.

"Anythin' yu want to tell me?" was how he asked for orders.

"Why, no," Seth replied with affected surprise. "There's a young fella I'll introduce yu to who fancies his brand o' poker; it wouldn't do him no harm to be educated some, but you'll remember he's a friend o' mine."

The Parson nodded. "Don't happen to have a spare gun, do yu?" he asked. "That swine Sudden took mine."

Raven pulled out another drawer in the desk. "Yu can have this; I never carry one," he said.

The gambler took the six-shooter and slipped it into his shoulder-holster. "All right for yu," he said. "Folks come an' give yu their money; yu don't never have to argue with 'em. Pussonally, I don't feel dressed unless I'm heeled.

Thanks, Seth; see yu later."

So it came about that Bordene met the new-comer, presented as "Mister Pardoe," and accepted the saloon-keeper's proposal for a "little game." Youth is rarely critical, but he was not favourably impressed by the stranger. Moreover, as they moved towards a vacant table, he saw the marshal was watching them, and fancied he caught a slight shake of the head. Was it a warning? He looked again, but Green was apparently no longer interested. Nevertheless, when a fourth man had been found and the game had started Andy became aware of Green and Barsay just behind him.

"Yessir," the marshal was saying. "It was in Tombstone, and they caught him dealin' from the bottom o' the pack." "Oughta shot the coyote," Pete said.

"Well, mebbe he was lucky thataway," the other conceded. "They just took his clothes off, poured a barrel o' molasses over him, rolled him in the sand, an' rid him outa town on a rail. It oughta been a complete cure."

Pardoe was facing Bordene and the latter was astounded at the sudden flush on the gambler's bilious face and the vindictive look he cast at the speaker. In a second, however, his eyes were on his cards again. Andy glanced at Raven, but the saloonkeeper's features were an expressionless mask. All at once he looked up.

"Sit in, marshal," he invited.

Green shook his head. "I'm on duty," he said, and smiled.

"Huh! It's quiet to-night—there'll be nothin' startin'," Raven replied.

"Just the time to watch out," the officer said.

Even as he spoke, the door of the saloon was thrust open and a wild figure sprang in. Snaky black hair hung beneath the pushed-back hat, bloodshot eyes glared behind the levelled six-shooter, and a snarling mouth showed teeth like yellow fangs. For an instant the man stood, his head turning from side to side as he surveyed the room, and then he let out a savage screech; most of the hearers knew it for the Apache war-cry.

"I want a man," he shouted. "I ain't killed one to-day, an' I'm that pizenous that when rattlers bite me they crawl away an' die. Where's thisyer marshal I bin hearin' about?"

Green noted furtive smiles on some of the faces. Had this fellow been primed with drink and put up to this silly prank to try the new officer out? Such a notion was quite in keeping with Western humour, and if the fool forgot that it was a joke... He stepped forward.

"Yu wantin'me?" he asked quietly.

Silence fell upon the room; the flip of cards and the rattle of poker chips ceased; the hum of conversation died out; everyone was intent on what was taking place. The moment Green had spoken the stranger froze, his gun covering the marshal's broad chest. The latter, making no attempt to draw his own weapon, advanced until a bare three yards separated the pair.

"Git down an' say yore prayers," the intruder ordered. "I'm Wild Bill Hickok, an' a shootin' fool. I'm agoin' to send yu down the Long Trail."

The marshal's laugh rang out. "Yore name's 'Hiccup' an' yo're a shoutin' fool. Now"—with a speed that baffled the eye his gun swept up, the muzzle within a few inches of the one covering him—"shoot, yu false alarm!"

As though dazed by a blow the ruffian glared at him. How it had come about he did not know, but he realized that he had been outplayed. To fire now would be suicide; he might slay the marshal but assuredly before he did so, lead would be tearing through his own body. At the thought his nerve failed. Green saw the indecision in his eyes.

"Drop it," he rasped, and there was more than an order in the words.

For a second the fellow hesitated, and then the gun clattered on the board floor. At the same instant the marshal's left fist came round and up, landing on the jaw with all the force of his body behind it; the man dropped like a pole-axed steer. Sheathing his gun, Green set the door open, and gripping the senseless one by neck and belt, flung him headlong into the street.

"If that fella's got any friends here they'd better tell him to hit the trail 'bout daylight," he said, and walked back to the bar.

Pete Barsay sat on a tilted chair, his back against one jamb of the marshal's office door and his upraised feet on the other. Green had gone riding somewhere, and to lighten his solitude Pete sang as he rolled himself a smoke: An' speakin' o' women, yu never can tell. Sometimes they's heaven, an' sometimes they's...

"Oh, sir!" reproved a low, sweet voice, before he could complete the verse.

The vocalist's heels thumped the floor and he grabbed his hat from his head as he swung round to face the prettiest girl he had ever seen. Her smile added to his confusion.

"What is the name of that song?" she asked. "I don't think I've heard it before."

The deputy was not surprised at this, but he did not say so. Instead, he lied nobly. "I dunno, ma'am; that's all of it I ever learned my own self." He grinned with returning courage. "I guess I'll have to leave that last bit out when yo're around."

"I'm afraid you are a flatterer, Mister—?" the girl said.

"My name's Barsay, an' my friends call me Pete," he volunteered. "I'm bettin' yo're Miss Tonia Sarel."

"You win," she replied. "Do you sing much?"

Pete regarded her with a suspicious eye, but save for a distracting dimple, she seemed quite serious. "I do not," he confessed. "Speakin' general, I on'y inflicts my vocal efforts on longhorns when they're a-beddin' down. Mebbe yu'd call it cruelty to animals, but cows ain't nowadays critical, an' my voice ain't started a stampede yet. Won't yu set down?"

"I just called to see the marshal," she said. "I suppose he is busy?"

"Not so as yu'd notice it," Pete said gloomily. "The durned town is dead—nothin' happens. Ever since me an' the marshal took office"—he grinned pridefully at the phrase—"folks here has been asleep. Yu'd think we were keepin' Sunday school. I'm tellin' yu, we got this town so tame we'll be losin' our jobs. If suthin' don't bust loose soon—" He broke off suddenly as a rider dashed into view at the western end of the town. Bent low in the saddle, he was almost invisible in the clouds of dust which rose beneath the hammering hoofs of his horse. Barsay thrust the girl inside the door.

"That gent has pressin' business with somebody, an' mebbe it's me," he apologized. "Bullets ain't got no respect for beauty."

It appeared that he was correct in his surmise, for on reaching the marshal's office, the rider pulled down his panting pony and leapt off. Barsay then saw that it was Andy Bordene, his face grimed with dust and perspiration, drawn and haggard, his eyes wild.

"Where's the marshal?" he cried hoarsely.

At that moment Green came up, having just turned his mount into the Red Ace corral. "Who wants me?" he asked, and then, recognizing the young rancher. "What's the trouble, Bordene?"

"Dad's been shot—murdered!" came the broken answer. "Marshal, I want yu to help me find the dog who did it."

With a pitiful cry Tonia ran to the side of the stricken boy, striving to comfort as she forced him to sit down, for the shock and subsequent punishing ride had taken a heavy toll and he was all in. Green slipped into the saloon and came back with a glass.

"Drink this, and then tell us about it," he said.

The raw spirit gave Andy strength and steadied his shattered nerves. After a moment or two he looked up, and in a dull monotone, told his story.

"Dad started for town early this mornin'," he began. "I suppose he got here?"

"Yeah. I saw him myself, goin' into the bank," Green told him.

The boy nodded. "He told me he was drawin' some money an' he intended to come back pretty prompt," Andy said. "I set out for Lawless 'bout two hours later, an' when I got to the Old Mine I found him lyin' in the trail. His hoss was grazing close by, an' at first I thought he'd been pitched or had a sunstroke. Then I saw the blood—he'd been shot in the back. Just as I stooped over him, he opened his eyes, said one word, an' was—gone."

His voice tailed away to a whisper, and as he finished his head dropped despairingly. Tonia's arm pressed his shoulders in silent sympathy. She knew how he felt; she herself had faced the same tragic happening.

"What was the word?" the marshal asked.

"Sudden," was the reply. "That damned outlaw has bushwhacked my dad for a few paltry dollars. Marshal, we gotta get him; I'll never rest till—" His voice rose hysterically as he strove to stand up. Green pressed him back into his seat.

"We'll get him, sooner or later," he promised, and his voice was stern. "Yu stay with Miss Tonia till we fetch our bosses."

They returned in a few moments to find Andy sitting tight-lipped, his dull gaze staring into vacancy. The girl stood silently by, her eyes filled with the tears she would not shed until the bereaved boy had gone. Claspin' her two hands in his—he could not trust himself to speak—Andy mounted his pony and the three men set out for the scene

of the tragedy, first calling at the bank, where they learned that the murdered man had drawn out five thousand dollars.

Slumped in his saddle, Bordene led the way at a fast lope. The shock of this, his first real rebuff in life, had driven the youthfulness from his face, leaving a grimness mingled with the grief. The marshal and his deputy followed in silence.

Less than an hour's riding brought them to the Old Mine, a little group of low, rocky mounds shrouded in small timber and brush through which the trail passed. A saddled horse was tied to a tree, but there was no body.

"I carried him into that hut," Bordene explained, pointing to a rude cabin at the foot of one of the hillocks, the pathway to which was almost obscured by undergrowth.

Pushing their way through they came upon the murdered man. Green stopped and made a quick examination. "Shot in the back—twice," he said. "An' the cash is missin', though there is some small change in the pockets; a Greaser wouldn't 'a' left that." He rose and looked round. Two shining objects attracted his attention—used shells. "Forty-fives," he commented, slipping them into the pocket of his chaps. "Pistol-work. Whereabout did yu find him, Andy?"

The young man pointed to where a bit of the trail lay in plain view, and Green began to examine the floor of the hut, which was of packed sand. Presently he stood up.

"I figure it was this way," he said. "The bushwhacker hid in here by the door—yu can see the marks of his heels—an' when the old man passed, he got him. Musta waited some time too, for he smoked three cigarettes." He picked up the ends and broke one open. "Good Bull Durham," he added, sniffing the tobacco. "No Mexican trash. We gotta find where he left his hoss."

"What's the use of ail this, marshal?" broke in Bordene querulously. "We know who did it."

"Do we? Any fella can call hisself Sudden," Green retorted, and his tone was so harsh that Pete looked at him in surprise. "It would be a damn easy way o' blottin' a trail."

The young man bit his lips. "I didn't think o' that," he admitted.

It did not take them long to find where the killer had hidden his horse. Just behind the hut the lower foliage of a tree had been nibbled, and a branch bore traces of having been chafed. Moreover, in the bark of the trunk, Green's quick eye discerned several hairs and the hoofprints showed that the animal had .. been restive. The hairs were black.

"Sudden is said to ride a black, ain't he?" Andy questioned.

"Yeah," the marshal replied.

He was on his knees, studying the hoofprints carefully. Presently he stood up, and they went to the spot where the body had been found. The ground here was matted with the marks of both men and horses. Green pored over them for some time, gradually picked out the ones he wanted—those of the murderer's mount—and noted that they went south. Then he announced his decision.

"I'm goin' to follow his tracks," he said. "Pete, yu'll stay here while Andy goes to the Box B for a wagon an' some of his boys to take the old man to town: there'll have to be an enquiry."

When the boy had gone, the marshal rolled and lighted a cigarette, and selecting a small rock, squatted and smoked in silence. His deputy stood it for a while, and then:

"Bordene is hard hit," he said.

"He'll get over it," Green replied. "Ol' Man Trouble sits lightly on the shoulders o' youth an' is easy shook off."

Silence again ensued, and presently the deputy tried once more:

"Ever run acrost this jasper, Sudden?" he asked, and this time he got a surprise.

"Yeah, I know him pretty well," the marshal returned. He looked at his assistant reflectively for a moment, and then, with the air of one who has at last come to a decision, he went on, "Pete, yu ain't got no more brain than a sage-hen, but I think yo're white, an' I'm goin' to gamble on it. Yu heard me pull up young Bordene pretty brisk just now an' mebbe wondered why?"

"Shore did," Pete agreed.

"Well, here's the reason," Green resumed. "The fella that did this job an' brought off the other plays in this part o' the country ain't the genuine Sudden; he's just shovin' the blame on another man, yu sabe?"

"How'd yu know?" queried the deputy.

"Because I happen to be the real Sudden," came the amazing answer.

For some moments Pete stared goggle-eyed at the man who had calmly claimed to be one of the most famous—or infamous—outlaws in the South-west, and then he shook his head knowingly and laughed.

"I'd never 'a' guessed it—me havin' no brain," he grinned. "Mighta suspected yu o' being Julius Caesar or OF King Cole, but—" He stopped short as he read the other's expression.

"May I be whittled to chips if he don't believe it hisself; musta bin eatin' loco-weed."

"I'm givin' yu the straight goods, yu idjut," the marshal said seriously. "I'm the man they call Sudden down in Texas an' New Mexico. I came here to find Mister Sudden the Second—the fella who's buildin' me a reputation an' doin' well out of it. I don't claim to be no plaster saint, but I've had too many things hung on me a'ready an' I aim to stop it. I reckoned yu had to know who yu were trailin' with."

Bar say got up, and if there was a smile on his face it was but an attempt to hide the feeling in his voice. "Jim," he said, "I don't care if yo're forty outlaws rolled into one; I'm backin' yore game to a fare-yu-well."

The marshal gripped the outthrust hand. "I knowed I wasn't makin' a mistake," he said. "I'm thankin' yu, Pete."

The plump little puncher scuffled his feet and looked uncomfortable. "Shucks!" he muttered.

The marshal's reply put them back on their old easy footing. "Awright, just listen to me. What I've told yu has gotta be kept tight behind yore teeth. If Lawless gets to know there'll be a necktie party an' we'll be the guests. Now, I'm goin' to trail Mister Bushwhacker. Yu go back with the body an' see if yu can learn anythin' in town."

This arrangement was not to Barsay's liking, but his chief smiled away all his objections and forthwith departed. He left the little man with plenty to occupy his mind. Remarkable as was the revelation to which he had listened, doubt of it never occurred to him.

"I just knowed he warn't no ordinary puncher," he muttered. "Sudden, huh? He's all o' that, I reckon."

CHAPTER VI

For a mile or more the marshal was able to maintain a fair pace, the tracks of the horse which had been tied behind the shack being plain. Presently, however, they turned off the beaten trail to the Box B, following a mere pathway which twisted tortuously through the brush. Green noted that the fugitive was heading south and making no effort to hide the fact. Pausing at the top of a slight ridge, he scanned the surrounding country.

There was no sign of his quarry, and, indeed, he had not expected there would be; in such country, the man might have been but a few hundred yards distant and still unseen. The marshal moved down the slope of the ridge, threaded a narrow arroyo, and pulled up again. In front lay an expanse of semi-desert, a broad stretch of sand relieved only by clumps of bunch-grass, cactus, and mesquite. The trail led straight on to this and abruptly vanished. For a moment the trailer was at a loss, and then he noticed that his hoof prints had also gone, the fine granular sand trickling back and filling up the depressions almost as soon as they were made.

"This fella ain't no stranger," the marshal muttered. "Well, Nig, if he's headin' for the Border we gotta go on."

Holding a straight line, he crossed the little desert, and after a short search picked up the trail again on the other side. Two miles brought him to a wide-banked, slow-moving river which he guessed must be Lazy Creek; the opposite bank was Mexico. At this time of the year the stream was shrunk to half its winter width and he had no difficulty in crossing. He found the familiar hoofprints on the other side only to lose them soon afterwards in a long narrow cleft, the floor of which consisted of weathered rock, detritus from the bare walls on either side.

He rode through the gully, emerging into a strip of park-like country interspersed with wooded knolls. Passing one of these, he heard a voice, harsh, speaking in Spanish.

"See if you can loosen his tongue, Lopez," it said.

Trailing his reins, the marshal crept cautiously up under cover of the chaparral. The sight was a singular one. At the side of a little glade an Indian was standing, his wrists tied behind him to a sapling. He was a tall fellow, of indeterminate age, his body emaciated by illness or starvation. He was naked save for a ragged pair of deerskin trousers. But for the fierce eyes he might have been a statue of bronze. Facing him was a yellow-skinned Mexican of the lowest type, in a huge sombrero, dirty blue shirt, and tattered overalls. He was holding a wicked-looking quirt, passing the lash through his fingers and eyeing the Indian gloatingly.

A few yards distant was the man who had spoken, a dark, swarthy fellow of middle age and stature, whose straight black hair framed one of the cruellest faces Green had ever seen. The nose was almost flat, the eyes narrow and near, and the thick, sensual lips were drawn back in a snarl, disclosing big, stained teeth. His attire was a parody of a uniform; a slouched hat pinned up at one side with a silver brooch; a flaming red tunic loaded with gold braid; faded blue pants tucked into high boots garnished with huge wheel spurs. From the gaudy sash round his middle peeped the butts of two pistols and the haft of a dagger.

At a nod from this man, and before the marshal could interfere, the peon swung his quirt and lashed the Indian savagely across the chest, the thong, knotted at the end, cutting an open weal from which the blood flew. Before the force of the blow the victim staggered, but instantly drew himself up and became again an inanimate thing. Only the clamped lips and bunched jaw-muscles betrayed his agony.

"Speak, dog, where is the gold?" thundered the man in uniform.

The Indian remained silent, his face a mask of pride, hatred, and contempt. The man in uniform read the expression

aright, and it goaded him to fury.

"Continue, Lopez," he hissed. "I'll find his tongue if I have to strip the flesh off his bones to do it."

With an eager grin the peon swished his bloodstained lash round his shoulder, but ere he could bring it down Green's gun crashed and he dropped in a huddled heap; his torturing days were ended. At the sound of the shot, the other man's hand went to his belt but came away empty at the sight of the newcomer's blazing eyes and levelled weapon.

"Reach, yu yellow skunk," came the terse order.

The man complied, but his expression was poisonous. "May I point out, señor, that you are on the wrong side of the line?" he observed.

"I'm on the right side o' this gun," Green grimly retorted. "What are yu up to? "

The Mexican shrugged his shoulders. "Bah! Only an Indian," he sneered. "He knows where there ees much gold, señor, but the dog ees obstinate."

The marshal did not reply. Stepping up to the man he drew the pistols from his sash and flung them, one after the other, into the brush. The dagger he used to free the captive and then turned again to the Mexican.

"Take off yore coat," he ordered.

An expression of surprise showed in the sallow face. It was not like an Americano to rob a man of his clothes, though, of course, the garment was a desirable one, and as he did not wish to lose it, the wearer ventured a protest.

"It may interest the señor to learn that I am El Diablo," he said softly. "He weel have heard of me?"

If the marshal was interested he did not show it; his narrowed eyes continued to regard the ridiculous figure with cold contempt. So this was the guerrilla leader whose reputation for savage cruelty was unequalled in Northern Mexico, and who, at the head of his band of so-called revolutionaries, robbed, murdered, and ravaged along the Border, even crossing it at times to raid the ranches for cattle and horses. Though Green inwardly cursed the luck that had thrown the man in his way, he was determined to punish him.

"El Diablo, huh?" he sneered. "Well, if yu don't shuck that coat, I'll send yu home so fast yu'll get singed on the way."

That the guerrilla leader understood the grim witticism is doubtful, but the menacing movement of the speaker's gun could not be mistaken and he obeyed the order. The marshal turned to the Indian, impassively waiting, and pointed to the quilt lying beside the body of Lopez. A gleam of fire shone in the black eyes as the redskin realized the white man's intention. El Diablo also understood, and his dark face grew first pale with fear and then red with shame. His voice shrilled out as the Indian picked up the whip and came towards him.

"Señor, theenk what you do," he cried desperately. "I am a white man like yourself. I am not a peon, as he"—with a gesture towards Lopez—"but a caballero, a descendant of Old Spain."

"If yu don't keep them paws up yu won't be a descendant a-tall, yu'll be an ancestor."

Jocular as the voice was, no humour showed in the granite-hard features of the speaker, and the Mexican knew he might just as well hope for mercy from his late victim, who now stood before him, whip in hand, bitter hatred in his gaze. Reading that look, and recalling what he knew of a red man's ideas of revenge, the marshal was satisfied that the bandit was getting off somewhat lightly. He nodded to the redskin, the whip whistled through the air, and the Mexican shrieked as the knotted lash cut away the flimsy fabric of his shirt, leaving a bloody track from shoulder to hip. Again the marshal nodded, and again the whip fell, this time in the opposite direction, scoring the yellow flesh as though it had been slashed with a knife. Mad with agony, the stricken man clutched at his breast and rolled upon the ground, spitting out curses upon the man who had so shamed him. The marshal regarded him scornfully.

"Yu may be of Old Spain an' this fella on'y an Injun, but he's got yu skinned when it comes to takin' medicine," he commented. "Shut yore rank mouth an' keep mighty still 'less yu want some more o' yore own treatment."

He turned just in time to see the redskin take two stumbling steps and fall prone.

"Agua," he whispered as Green bent over him.

The marshal grabbed a canteen slung about the body of Lopez, marvelling at the enormous will-power which had enabled the Indian, though nearly dead with exhaustion, to stand' up and mete out terrible punishment to his foe.

"Damn it, I ain't got no affection for war-whoops, but they're men," he muttered.

The water proved effective, and in a few moments the Indian was able to stand up. The marshal pointed to the guerrilla leader's horse, which, elaborately saddled and bridled, was tied to a nearby bush.

"Fork that cayuse an' we'll punch the breeze," he said. "This hombre will have friends not so far off, an' it'll be healthier for us if we ain't around when they arrive."

The redskin climbed into the saddle, his set teeth showing what the effort cost him, and Green led the way to where he had left his own mount. From where he lay motionless on the ground the beady, venomous eyes of the Mexican followed them. Only when they had vanished in the thick foliage did he venture to rise and shake a vengeful fist in their direction.

"We shall meet again," he grated. "And then it will be the turn of El Diablo. Dios! but you shall pay."

Meanwhile the marshal and his companion were wasting no time in covering the ground to the Border. Not until they were on the far side of the river did Green attempt to learn anything of the man he had rescued. The redskin's eyes flashed as he answered the blunt question.

"Me Black Feather—Mohave chief—one time," he said slowly in a deep, guttural tone.

The marshal realized much of what lay behind the simple statement; he had lived with the red men. He knew that Black Feather was an outcast—willing or unwilling—from his tribe.

He had been guilty of some offence, had lost his "medicine," or was, perhaps, satisfying a private vengeance. Whatever the reason, for the time being, he had no lodge, no people, he was a wanderer. Further enquiry elicited that he had fallen into the clutches of the bandit and his follower by evil chance; they had shot his pony and, in common belief that the Indian always knows "the home of the gold," had tortured him.

Realizing that the trail of Bordene's murderer was now hopelessly lost, the marshal headed for home. They reached Lawless after dark, so that the citizens missed the rather amazing sight of their newly-appointed law-officer holding a drooping Indian in a silver-mounted saddle, on the back of a fine, Spanish-bred horse. When the pair arrived at the marshal's quarters, the sick man slumped to the ground in a dead faint. Pete, who was standing at the door, hurried forward.

"Yu ain't goin' to tell me this fella bumped off Bordene?" he said incredulously.

"I am not," the marshal said. "Push them broncs in the corral an' come help fix him up. He's all in."

He hoisted the slack form to his shoulder and went inside. When Pete returned he found the patient stretched on his bed and the marshal bandaging his hurts.

"This fella's pretty sick. See here, he's bin shot in the leg as well, an' never let out a chirp about that," Green said admiringly. "An' here's vu—a white man—yowlin' like a lost soul over a mangy bed."

"It ain't a mangy bed—or it wasn't till yu put that doggone aborigine in it," Pete retorted. He looked at the still senseless form. "Reckon he'll make it?"

"Shore thing. Injuns is hard to kill—as Uncle Sam knows," the marshal replied. "I've a hunch he'll pay for savin', an' anyways, I couldn't do nothin' else."

He went on to tell the story of his trailing, and Pete whistled when he heard of the guerrilla leader.

"El Diablo, huh?" he said. "Yu've stirred up a lively nest o' hornets there; he's rank pizen an' as vain as a peacock, they say. It's a safe bet he's got friends in Lawless too."

"Yu'll have me scared to death in a minit," his chief smiled.

Pete looked at him. "Fella can crowd his luck too close," he replied. "Wonder where that bushwhackin' coyote hid up?"

"Doubled back, likely as hot," the marshal opined. "Wouldn't astonish me none if he's right in Lawless now. Rustle some chuck; I've an idea our guest has missed meals lately."

CHAPTER VII

On the following morning the enquiry into the taking off of Andrew Bordene was held in the dance-hall attached to the Red Ace, where all public meetings of importance were convened. Nothing new transpired. Potter, the banker, deposed to the dead man having drawn out five thousand dollars, stating that he had a debt to pay. Andy related his story and the marshal told of his investigation, but he did not produce the empty shells he had picked up, nor make any reference to what had happened over the Border. The jury returned a verdict of wilful murder against the outlaw known as "Sudden," and the whole assembly adjourned to discuss the affair at the bar. Here the marshal found Raven, with two men he did not know. The saloon-keeper beckoned.

"Marshal," he said, "meet Reuben Sarel of the Double S, and Saul Jevons, foreman o' my ranch, the 88."

The fat man extended a moist, flabby hand, but Jevons merely nodded. He was about the same height as the marshal but older by ten years. He possessed a powerful but angular frame, a lean, hatchet face, and his dark, straggling moustache failed to hide a slit of a mouth. From ear to chin on his left cheek was a puckered white scar, relic of an old wound, which gave the impression of a perpetual sneer. The marshal disliked the fellow at sight.

"Bad business this, marshal," Sarel remarked. "Bordene was a white man an' a valued citizen. We're lookin' to yu to put a crimp in this fella Sudden."

"He's gotta be found first, Reub," Jevons said, and there was a suspicion of a jeer in his tone. "Yu ain't suspectin' that Injun yu toted in, are yu?" This to the marshal.

"Not any," that officer replied. "I picked him up on the trail; he'd bin shot, stripped, an' set afoot."

"What nation?" asked Raven.

"Claims to be Mohave, but I figure he's a stray," the marshal told him. "He ain't talked much yet."

"Bah! Better 'a' left him; I'd as soon fetch home a hurt rattler," Jevons said savagely. "Redskins is all liars an' thieves."

"Saul is a bit sore on war-paints just now," Raven explained. "He's bin losin' a few steers an' he's blamin' them for it."

"Well, I got no use for Injuns, but I reckon it's more likely them toughs in Tepee Mountain is liftin' yore beef, Raven," the Double S man offered.

After a while the other two sat down to play cards, and Raven led the marshal into his office.

"Yu got any private opinion 'bout this killin'?" he asked.

"I said all I had to say at the enquiry," was the reply.

"Young Andy could 'a' done it," the saloon-keeper suggested. Green shook his head. "Pete an' me checked up the times; we know when the old man left Lawless an' when Andy started from the Box B; he'd have had to ride mighty good to reach the Old Mine before his dad," he pointed out. "'Nother thing, Andy carries a .44, which takes the same fodder as his Winchester."

Seth could not gainsay this. "O' course, I was on'y givin' yu a possible line. Andy is in pretty deep with me, an' the old man didn't know it."

"Anyways, he couldn't 'a' held up the stage, being at the Box B all that day."

"Huh! Bound to be the same fella, yu think?" "Shore as shootin'."

Raven picked up a large sheet of coarse paper. "What yu think o' this?" he queried.

It was a notice, printed in large capitals, offering a reward of one thousand dollars for the capture of the man known as "Sudden," or information leading thereto. No particulars of the outlaw were given, but the horse was described. The document was signed by the saloon-keeper.

"Might produce somethin'," the marshal agreed. "We gotta do somethin'. This is the fourth play he has put across in a short while. It's up to yu an' Barsay, marshal," Raven said.

"We'll get him," Green said confidently, and picking up the notice, went to nail it outside the saloon door.

Seth Raven puzzled him. Apparently a public-spirited citizen, anxious for the welfare of the community, there was an elusive something which evaded the marshal. With an innate feeling that the man was crooked, he had to admit that so far he was not justified in that belief. A little later, when he entered his quarters, and went in to see the sufferer he found him still occupying Barsay's bed, and awake. The black eyes, no longer fierce, looked up at him gratefully, reminding him of a devoted dog: and as any sort of sentiment rendered him uncomfortable, his tone was almost abrupt as he asked, "Feelin' better?" "Me well now," the patient replied, and made to rise. The Indian is both proud and punctilious; he would crawl outside to die rather than remain an unwelcome guest. The marshal motioned him to lie down again.

"Make a job of it, amigo," he said, and his smile meant more than the words.

The sick man sank back with a grunt of relief; even that slight exertion had been too much for his exhausted frame.

"Black Feather no forget," he whispered.

Pete looked up as the marshal re-entered the office. "When do we start?" he asked hopefully.

"We don't," Green said. "I'm agoin' to see Sheriff Strade over to Sweetwater, an' I'm leavin' yu in charge—o' the patient."

"Well, of all the hawgs," ejaculated Barsay. "Why can't yu nurse the nigger an' let me see Strade?"

"He might recognize yu," Green replied, his eyes twinkling. The appalling impudence of this remark struck the deputy dumb, and before he could recover, the marshal was on his way to the corral. Pete watched him saddle the big black, swing lightly to the saddle, and lope away. He grinned ruefully.

"Ain't he the aggravatin' cuss?" he asked himself. "An' I can't get mad at him neither—not real mad. I hope to Gawd the sheriff don't recognize him—for the sheriff's sake."

* * *

Pete's fear was due to be realized, though the consequences were not serious. To Strade, the tall man who walked into his office and, giving his name, announced himself as the new marshal of Lawless, seemed faintly familiar.

"Ain't I seen yu afore some place?" he asked.

"Yeah, lying outside the Red Ace," Green smiled. "Mebbe I wasn't as bad as yu figured. Yu savvy, sheriff, a drunken man'll get more information in two days than a sober one in that number o' weeks; folks take it he's too 'blind' to see or hear anythin'."

"Yu was layin' for the marshal's job then?" Strade queried.

Green grinned at him. "Yeah, I went to Lawless to get it; I'm after the fella who calls hisself Sudden."

There was emphasis on the concluding words and Strade straightened up with a jerk, "Yu tellin' me that it ain't the real Sudden pirootin' round in these parts?" he asked.

"Just that," the visitor replied, and anticipating the inevitable question, he added, "Take a squint at this."

From his vest pocket he produced a folded paper. The sheriff saw that it was a printed bill, offering a reward of five hundred dollars for the capture of one "Sudden." A somewhat vague description followed: "Young, dark hair and moustache, grey-blue eyes, dressed as a cowboy, wears two guns, and rides a black horse with a white blaze on face and white stocking on off fore-leg." The bill had been issued by the sheriff of Fourways, Texas.

Strade looked up and nodded. "That agrees with what we got," he said. "Neither Sands nor Eames could say much about the man—him bein' masked—but they got the hoss to a dot."

"They couldn't both be wrong, an' Eames—a hoss-user—certainly wouldn't be."

The sheriff looked puzzled. "What's yore point?"

"Accordin' to this"—Green tapped the printed notice—"the real Sudden's hoss has a white stockin' on the off fore, but both yore men say the near. Ain't that so?"

Strade reached some papers from a drawer and referred to them. "Yo're right," he admitted. "Funny I didn't spot that. Somebody's made a mistake."

"Yeah, an' it's Mister Bushwhacker," Green said. "He's painted the wrong leg of his bronc."

The Sweetwater sheriff scratched his head. "It does shorely look like yu've hit the mark," he said. "We've bin searchin' for a stranger, but it might be anybody—"

He broke off suddenly and his eyes narrowed as they rested on the black horse hitched outside. Green saw the look and laughed.

"No use, ol'-timer," he said. "I was in the Red Ace when the stage was held up."

The sheriff laughed too. "Sorry, Green," he apologized. "This damn job makes a fella suspect hisself a'most. Yu stayin' over?"

"I was aimin' to."

"Good, then yu'll dig in with me. Bachelor quarters, but I reckon yu'll prefer 'em. The hotel here stuffs its mattresses with rocks."

"Bein' rocked to sleep don't appeal to me," the visitor grinned, and then his face sobered. "'Fore we go any further, there's somethin' yu have to know." The sheriff looked at him, surprised at the change of tone. "That black out there is Sudden's hoss with the blaze an' stockin' on the off fore dyed out."

The geniality faded from the sheriff's face, to be replaced by a hard, bleak look; his right hand, which had been resting on the table, dropped to his side. The marshal, rolling a smoke, took no notice of the movement.

"Don't froth up, sheriff," he warned. "I could beat yu to it. I'm Sudden, an' I'm here to find the skunk who's fillin' his pockets an' puttin' the blame on me. It's bin done before, Strade, an' while I don't claim to be no sort of a saint, I ain't a thief, an' I never shot a man who wasn't gunnin' for me."

Strade listened with growing amazement; he had pictured the famous gunman as very different to the cool, nonchalant young man who so calmly announced his identity.

"Take a squint at this," the level voice proceeded. "I ain't aimin' to use it unless I have to; this job concerns me personal'."

Strade took the proffered paper and saw that it was an official document, formally appointing James Green a deputy-sheriff in the service of the Governor of the Territory, by whom it was signed. For a long moment the sheriff pondered, two points uppermost in his mind: that this could not be the man he was looking for, and that Sudden was playing a straight game. Handing back the paper he pushed out a paw.

"Shake," he said. "I'm takin' yore word."

Green gripped the hand, his eyes lighting up. "Even my friends allow I'm a poor liar," he smiled. "Ever hear of fellas named Peterson and Webb?"

Strade shook his head. "What yu want 'em for?" he asked.

"They've lived too long," was the grim reply, and the sheriff said no more.

Years later, when the news of their finding¹ filtered through from a distant part of the country, he was to remember the question.

At Strade's suggestion, they went out to take a look at the town. It proved to be another Lawless, but larger, and of a slightly less unsavoury reputation, due to the efforts of a sheriff who took his duties seriously. In the course of the evening, Green was presented to several of the leading citizens, played a pleasant game of poker, and presently retired with his host. Back in the little parlour, the sheriff talked business again.

"Bad about Bordene," he said, when he had heard the whole story. "He was a straight man. Nothin' distinctive 'bout them two shells yu found, I s'pose?"

"They were .45's, an' one of 'em had a scratch along the side," the marshal told him. "I'd say one chamber of his gun was nicked someway."

"Huh! Might be helpful," the sheriff said. "Sands an' the messenger was drilled by .45's too, but the shells was

clean, an' that's the common calibre round here."

As they gripped hands, the sheriff had a parting word:

"Glad yu came over," he said, and meant it. "Any time yu want help, I'll come a-runnin'."

"I'm obliged," the marshal said. "Yu know the country."

"I know Lawless," Strade warned him.

1. Related in "The Range Robbers."

CHAPTER VIII

Several uneventful days followed the marshal's return. In truth, Lawless was wondering about its new custodian of the peace. Though his treatment of Rusty and Leeson savoured of leniency, the speed with which he "got action" made even the toughest citizen dubious about challenging his authority.

Rest and regular food soon restored the Indian to health, but he showed no disposition to depart. He had relinquished Pete's bed and slept on the floor of the little kitchen, Green presenting him with a couple of blankets. With a shirt, an old pair of pants, and his moccasins carefully mended, Black Feather's wardrobe was complete. As soon as he was able he chopped wood for the stove and cleaned the place up generally. In spite of this evident desire to be useful, Pete continued to regard him with suspicion.

With the little man in this mood it was waste of time to argue, so the marshal did not explain that he had a use for their guest. But as soon as the Indian was able to sit a saddle, he took him to the Old Mine and showed him the hoofprints of the killer's horse, which, as there had been no rain, were still clear.

"I was followin' them when I run across vu," he explained.

Black Feather studied the marks closely for a few moments and then swung into his saddle again. "Me find," he said gravely, and rode away.

The marshal returned to Lawless, and in reply to Pete's enquiry as to the whereabouts of their guest, told him of the incident. The deputy was plainly pessimistic.

"Betcha five dollars he fades," he offered, and chortled when the other took the wager. "Easy money, ol'-timer, easy money."

"Yeah, for me," the marshal retorted.

And so it proved, for, to Pete's chagrin, the Indian returned late in the evening. Standing for a moment before the marshal, he said, "No find—yet," and stalked solemnly into the kitchen.

"Chatty devil, ain't he?" Barsay said. "Double or quits he don't locate the hoss."

"I'll go yu," Green smiled. "Easy money, ol'-timer."

When they rose the next morning, the Indian had already vanished, and they saw no sign of him until the evening.

Though he was obviously tired out, there was a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes.

"Me find um," he said, and that was all.

Peeping into the kitchen a little later, they saw him, rolled in his blankets, fast asleep, his precious carbine beside him.

"Bet he's had one punishin' day trailin' that hoss," Green said. "Wonder where he found him?"

"S'pose he'll show yu to-morrow," the deputy said. "Yu want me along?"

"No use both goin'," Green replied. "Yu better stay here to see that no festive cow-person ropes the office an' drags it into the desert."

The sun was not yet up and there was a keen bite in the air when the marshal and the Mohave set out. Once clear of the town, the redskin turned his horse's head to the north-west, in the direction of Tepee Mountain, and for an hour they loped over miles of level range, sandy soil thickly dotted with bunch-grass, creosote, and mesquite. Green guessed that his guide was taking him direct to the finish of his trailing; evidently the murderer had, as he suspected, doubled back after crossing the Border. Deep gorges, masked by black pine forests, slashed the lower slopes of the range, and above them towered the great grey granite peak.

Into one of these ravines the Indian led the way, his mount splashing along a small stream which swept smoothly over its stony bed. For about a quarter of a mile they rode in the water, and then the leader turned sharply to the left and vanished in the bordering bushes. The marshal followed, to find an unexpected break in the wall of the gorge, an opening only a few yards wide, guarded by a rough pole gate. On the other side was a tiny pocket of not more than a dozen acres, covered with rich grass and walled in by cliff. At the far end a black horse was grazing. On a bare patch of ground near the entrance, which his guide carefully avoided, were several hoofmarks, some of which

Green recognized; the others had been made by a smaller horse.

"Good work," he said approvingly, and the Indian's expressive eyes gleamed at the praise. "I reckon there ain't much doubt, but we'll make shore."

They rode slowly into the valley, keeping away from the strange horse until they were level with it, and then Green suddenly whirled his mount and jumped it at the grazing animal, round the neck of which the noose dropped before the victim could dodge. Slipping from his saddle, the marshal walked up the rope, coiling it as he approached, but ready for a breakaway. The black, however, proved ropewise and docile; it allowed him to pull its head down and discover, at the roots of the hair, little flakes of white. Lifting the near foreleg, he found the same singularity.

"She's the hoss, shore enough," he muttered. "All we gotta do now is find the owner."

"Nothin' here—me look," Black Feather said.

"Huh! Just uses it as a private corral. Rides here, changes mounts to do his dirty work, an' has the other hoss waitin' to get away on," mused the marshal. "That means he ain't too far from here."

Leaving the gate exactly as they found it, they made their way back to the open range, and then, having warned him not to talk—Pete would have deemed this unnecessary—the marshal sent his companion back to town. He himself headed east, following the line of the mountain. Presently he began to come on scattered groups of cattle. He had drawn near to one of these and was endeavouring to decipher the brand when a bullet droned through the air, followed by the flat report, and a hoarse shout of "Put 'em up; the next one drills yu."

The marshal did not comply—his hands were too busy subduing the evolutions of Nigger, who, having decided objections to bullets whistling past his ears, never failed to register a protest. When the rider had succeeded in calming the black, he looked up into the gun of the man who had given the order. It was Leeson. Despite the threatening weapon, the marshal laughed.

"Why, if it ain't Mister Wild Bill 'Hiccup,'" he said. "Playin' with fire-arms, too. What yu mean, scaring my hoss thataway?"

The man glared at him, his finger itching to pull the trigger. But the marshal had been appointed by Raven, and besides, although his own gun was already out, he had an uneasy feeling that this jeering, confident devil would somehow get the better of him. So he holstered his pistol and said sullenly:

"Didn't know yu. Wondered what yore interest was in our cows, that's all."

"Yore cows?" the marshal repeated.

"Yeah, I'm ridin' for the 88," the man explained.

"Raven's ranch, huh? How far away is it?"

Leeson pointed east and said it was some three miles to the ranch-house.

"Who put yu up to that fool play the other night?" Green asked.

The man flushed. "Some o' the boys," he growled. "It was on'y a joke."

"Well, I hope yu laughed hearty," the marshal said. "So long."

He turned his horse and rode in the direction indicated.

The 88 ranch-house was an unpretentious log building of no great size and somewhat slovenly appearance. The bunk-house and corrals were rough, and conveyed the impression of being temporary structures. The rear of the ranch was protected by the lower slopes of the mountain, a jumbled, precipitous piece of country which made the open range in front the only means of approach. The place appeared to be deserted, but Green's shout of "Hello, the house," brought Jevons to the door. His eyes narrowed when he saw who the visitor was, but he forced an unwilling grin to his lips.

"Lo, marshal," he said. "What's brung yu out so far?"

"Just havin' a look round," Green said easily. "New territory to me, you see."

Jevons suddenly remembered his duties as host, "Light an' rest yore saddle," he invited, adding, "That's a good hoss yu got; had him long?"

"Coupla years," Green told him carelessly. "Some folks don't like blacks—claim they're unlucky; me, I ain't fussy."

"Don't care for 'em myself," the foreman said, "Wouldn't own one as a gift."

The room they entered was rudely furnished with the barest necessities and littered with a medley of saddles, bridles, guns, and the various paraphernalia of ranch equipment. Jevons produced a bottle and glasses.

"Yu 'pear to be pretty well fixed here," the guest offered, meaning exactly the opposite. "Raven come out much?"

"The place serves its purpose," the foreman said: and, boastfully, "Seth leaves things to me—must be a'most a month since he drifted over; reckon he finds the Red Ace more comfortable."

"Can't blame him," the marshal agreed. "Yu got some fierce scenery back o' yu; I ain't surprised yo're losin' cows."

"We ain't shy many, an' if folks warn't so soft over warpaints we wouldn't be losin' them," Jevons said pointedly.

"My men has orders to shoot any brave pirootin' round this range."

The marshal made a mental note to warn Black Feather, declined a second drink, and asked the nearest way back to

Lawless.

"Bear off east an' three-four miles'll bring yu to the drive trail north," Jevons told him.

Until the visitor had become a mere speak on the plain the foreman watched him, his lips twisted into an ugly sneer. "Wonder what yu were after, Mister Man?" he muttered. "I've a hunch yu ain't exactly mother's little helper so far as Seth is concerned, an' that it's goin' to be worth while to keep cases on yu."

Meanwhile the subject of this speculation was proceeding leisurely homewards, his mind busy with the problem he had to solve. That the man masquerading as "Sudden" was one of the refugees in Tepee Mountain he did not believe. The fact that the crimes had been perpetrated at propitious times could not be mere coincidence, the miscreant must have had inside knowledge. The location of the hidden horse so far from Sweetwater made Lawless the most likely place to look for the owner. He thought of Leeson, who had already adopted one famous alias.

"It don't need much nerve to shoot a fella from cover," he reflected. "If he thought I'd found an' collared the black it might explain his cuttin' loose on me so prompt, an' that shot was meant to hit—he warn't funnin'."

It was late in the afternoon when he reached the town, and putting his horse in the corral, joined his deputy in the little front room of their quarters.

Pete answered the marshal's question as to whether the Indian had returned.

"Sifted in two-three hours back," he said. "Couldn't git a word outa him. Gripes! a clam is one big chatterbox alongside that redskin."

"He's obeyin' orders," Green said, and told of the finding of the black horse and what followed.

"Leeson ain't got the brains," the deputy decided.

"Somebody else may be doin' the plannin'," Green argued.

"Who?" Pete asked unthinkingly, and instantly wanted to kick himself.

The marshal looked at him commiseratingly, "That's the worst o' them hair-trigger tongues," he said. "Fella's gotta say somethin' even when he's got nothin' to say."

This reasoning was too much for the deputy; with a snort of disgust he stamped out of the room. The marshal's smiling glance followed him.

"Tubby, yo're one good little man, white clean through," he apostrophized. "I'm shore glad I met up with yu." But not for worlds would he have had his friend hear this eulogy.

CHAPTER IX

Unwonted tranquillity reigned in Lawless, and the popularity of the new marshal with the better type of citizen increased daily. Such realized that this steady-eyed, good-humoured young man knew his job and was a very different proposition to the hard-drinking, swaggering ruffians who had previously held the position. The rougher element, though it did not like the officer, feared him, sensing the possibilities of violence beneath the quiet exterior. Naturally there was a good deal of curiosity respecting him. Durley, chatting at his door with Timms, the blacksmith, stated his own opinion.

"He's a man. Give him a square deal an' yu'll get the same. Hello, there's Tonia Sarel; ain't she the prettiest thing that ever happened?"

The girl, who had just emerged from the store on the other side of the street, had stopped to speak with Andy Bordene. Lawless had seen little of the young owner of the Box B since his father had been laid to rest in the little cemetery by the creek, for there had been much to do at the ranch. Tonia's quick eye saw at once the change in him; grief and responsibility had brought manhood. There were lines about the mouth and eyes that she had never seen and a gravity she had not yet known. But it was Andy's old smile that greeted her.

"Lo, Tonia, what good wind fetched yu in to-day?" he asked.

"A woman's usual excuse—shopping," she smiled. "We've been expecting you at the Double S."

"I know, but I've had stacks to do," he replied. "Dad, dear old boy, hadn't what they call a business head—he was straight himself an' trusted folks. His affairs were in a bit of a mess, an' I'll have to buckle in to put them right."

Tonia nodded. She knew he was telling her that the Box B was not as prosperous as he had expected to find it. Old Bordene, a bluff, out-of-doors specimen of the early pioneer, who regarded a given word binding as a written one, was the kind whose ranch might easily be in difficulties without his realizing it, if people whose promises he had carelessly accepted failed to redeem them.

"If we can do anything, Andy—" she began, and broke off at an exclamation from her companion.

"Sufferin' serpents! Here's a circus a-comin'."

The girl turned and saw a group of riders pacing slowly up the street. Their leader, who was mounted on a fine Spanish horse, was the most magnificently-attired person Lawless had ever beheld. His sombrero, bright scarlet

tunic, and blue trousers were lavishly decorated with gold braid, the spurs on his polished boots were of silver, and a wealth of the same metal adorned saddle and bridle. The half-dozen men who followed him were Mexicans, dressed in nondescript ragged garments, but all well armed.

"Who the blazes is that spangled jay?" asked a bystander.

"El Diablo, the guerrilla, though what the hell he's doin' this side o' the line, I dunno," replied another. "Wonder where he stole that hoss?"

It was Andy's laugh which drew the Mexican's attention to the girl, and at the sight of her his eyes gleamed. With a wrench at the reins he forced his mount to pivot on its hindlegs, and pulling up at the sidewalk, swept off his hat and spoke to Bordene, using the American tongue.

"I am Moraga; present me to the señorita."

His voice was harsh, commanding, and the bold gaze rested on the girl possessively as it absorbed the slim, graceful beauty of her. The young rancher saw the lust in the look, and this, added to the insolence of the demand, made him careless of offence. Disdainfully he replied:

"Never heard o' yu, an' we ain't carin'."

The guerrilla's yellow face became suffused and his smile changed to a snarl. "Perhaps the señor has heard of El Diablo?" he said softly, and seeing the question in the young man's face, he added, "Si, señor, I am El Diablo."

Andy's cool gaze travelled slowly over the Mexican. "Well—yu—shore—look it," he drawled, and taking Tonia by the arm, turned away.

For an instant the man who had called himself Moraga glared murder, his claw-like fingers hovering over the butt of the pistol thrust through his brightly-coloured sash. But he knew it would be madness—a dozen men would shoot him down if he drew the weapon, and with a savage oath he wheeled his horse, scoring its sides until the cruel spurs showed red, and rejoined his waiting followers. The humiliation made the still unhealed stripes under the gay coat burn like fire.

"Andy has shore rubbed that Greaser the wrongest way," grinned one of the spectators of the scene. "S'pose he's goin' to visit Seth?"

His surmise was correct, for at the Red Ace the Mexican wrenched his horse to a stop, flung the reins over the hitch-rail, and with a wave of dismissal to his men, vanished inside. The escort rode back to the dive presided over by their countryman, Miguel.

Closeted with Raven in the letter's office, the visitor showed no sign of his recent rage. Smoking a long, black cigar and occasionally helping himself to wine from a bottle on the desk, he was suavity itself. The saloon-keeper had been explaining something at length.

"So now yu got it," he concluded. "There'll be five hundred steers—mebbe more. They won't be wearin' my brand—I'm takin' 'em for a debt, yu understand, but once they're over the line their monograms won't matter, I reckon."

Moraga's thin lips curled in a meaning smile; he understood perfectly. This was not the first transaction between them, though on previous occasions the saloon-keeper had apparently sold his own cattle. He drew reflectively at his cigar and asked a question, casually:

"It musta bin Tonia Sarel," Raven said, with a keen glance. "Owns the Double S; father was dry-gulched in The Cut a while ago."

"So," the Mexican said. "Ver' preety, that señorita," One finger of his right hand was idly drawing a figure on the desk—the letter S. He completed it and began again, but this time he continued the up-stroke and the S became an 8. He laughed quietly, shot a sly look at his host, and said again, "Ver' preety." The saloon-keeper was not to be drawn; he was wearing his poker face. Moraga harked back.

"Who was the man?" he asked.

"From yore description I'd say it was young Bordene o' the Box B," Raven told him.

"Whose father was also—removed," Moraga said reflectively; and then, "So the Box B weel provide the steers thees time, señor?"

Seth Raven looked at the malicious, sneering face and had hard work to keep his temper.

"See here, Moraga, better not horn in on what don't concern yu," he advised. "It was a fool play to come ridin' in at the head of a young army as if yu owned the town."

"Would you have me sleenk in and out like a cur, señor?" the Mexican returned haughtily. "I am El Diablo."

"Which is why I'm warnin' yu," Raven replied, a touch of acid in his tone, "On yore side o' the line yu may be ace-high, but this side"—he smiled sourly at his own humour—"yo're the deuce. If yu take my tip, yu'll git back to yore own bank o' the ditch, pronto."

"Moraga does not run away," the other said boastfully. "I stay till evening."

The saloon-keeper shrugged his shoulders and offered no further protest. Probably there would be no trouble, but knowing Lawless, he wished his guest on his way.

Raven was not present when, later on, the guerrilla chief made his appearance in the Red Ace. A few of Seth's friends nodded a greeting, but most of the men present either sniggered or scowled as the garishly-clad figure strutted arrogantly to the bar. He had almost reached it when he saw the marshal, who, chatting with Pete, had not noticed his arrival. For an instant Moraga stood motionless, his eyes distended, his lips working, and then he snatched out his pistol.

The marshal caught one glimpse of the scarlet-coated form and acted. A powerful thrust with his left hand sent Pete reeling away and at the same time a spurt of flame darted from his right hip. The bullet, striking Moraga's gun, tore it from his numbed fingers. His left hand was reaching for his second pistol when a warning came.

"Don't yu," the marshal said, and the cold threat in the words penetrated even the brain of the infuriated Mexican. He hesitated, and before he could make up his mind, two men had grabbed his arms, holding him, cursing and struggling, while others got out of the line of fire. In the midst of the uproar Raven came surging in.

"What in hell's broke loose?" he thundered.

A dozen excited voices told him the story, and as he listened his face settled into a heavy scowl. He turned to Green.

"I'll attend to this," he said, and signed the men to release the captive. Then, with a fierce whispered word, he led the Mexican into his private room.

Immediately they had disappeared the excitement broke out again. Threats against the "Greaser" were freely uttered, and the saloon-keeper was openly blamed for what was regarded as an insult to the whole town.

"What made him pick on vu, marshal?" the store-keeper, Loder, enquired.

"Spotted my badge, I reckon," Green evaded with a laugh.

Meanwhile, Seth Raven was listening to a story which brought disquietude even to his usually impassive features, for Moraga, mad with rage at his second discomfiture, blurted out the tale of his former meeting with the marshal, despite the fact that he thereby published his own shame. Striding up and down the room, gesticulating, his voice rose to a shrill shriek as he cursed and threatened.

"I'll keel him—keel him by inches!" he cried, and his claw-like fingers opened and shut as though he held his enemy's throat.

"I ain't sayin' yu mustn't," Raven said quietly, "but yu can't do it now or here. He's the marshal, an' the way the fellas out there look at it yu've tried to run a blazer on the town. Hark to 'em." Through the partition they could hear loud and angry voices. "If yu wasn't my guest, señor, yu'd be dancin' a fandango on nothin' right now, an' yu can stick a pin in that," the saloon-keeper went on. "Yu better slide outa the back door, climb yore cayuse, an' hike for the Border."

Possessed by passion as he was, the visitor knew that Raven was right. So when, in response to a message, the marshal entered the office, there was no sign of the Mexican. Raven, slumped in his chair, greeted him with a frowning brow.

"Pretty damn mess yore blasted Injun has got us into," he began. "What's the idea, shootin' strangers up thisaway?" The marshal's eyes grew frosty and his jaw stiffened. "See here, Raven," he said, and his tone had an edge, "if yu think any yeller-skinned thief can pull a gun on me an' get away with it yu got another guess comin'. O' course"—and there was a suspicion of a sneer—"I didn't know he was a friend o' yores."

"Friend nothin'," the saloon-keeper replied testily. "He buys cows, pays a good price, an' saves me the trouble an' expense o' drivin' 'em to the rail-head. But it ain't that I'm thinkin' of. That hombre can raise more'n hundred men. S'pose he comes back an' stands the town up, what yu goin' to do?"

"Yo're scarin' me cold," Green said sarcastically. "Me? I should run like hell, o' course. Anythin' else yu wanta say to me?"

Raven shook his head, and for some time after Green had gone sat there deep in thought, inwardly cursing the new marshal and himself for having appointed him. It was becoming all too evident that this saturnine, self-reliant young puncher was not likely to "come to heel," and that—despite Raven's assertion to the contrary—he had quite a good notion of his responsibilities. Although he had given him the position, Raven knew he could not take it away without a very good excuse, and the fracas with Moraga, far from furnishing that, had only made the marshal more popular. When at length he got up there was an ugly expression on his face.

* * *

From the bunk-house of the Box B, Rusty watched the approach of a horseman along the trail, which, emerging from the thicket of spruce and cottonwood, zigzagged across the open stretch in front of the ranch. Presently the visitor was sufficiently near to be identified.

"The Vulture, huh?" murmured the cowboy. "I'm damned if he don't look like it too."

And, in fact, Raven, with his dark slouched hat, and long black coat-tails flapping in the light breeze, presented quite a resemblance to the bird he had been named after. He pulled up opposite the bunk-house.

"Andy around?" he asked curtly.

"I reckon," came the equally short reply.

Raven nodded and rode up to the ranch-house, a large one-storied log-building with a wide, roofed-in porch. His hail brought Bordene to the door.

"Lo, Seth," he greeted. "Get down an' spoil yore thirst. Takin' exercise to pull yore weight down, huh?"

The saloon-keeper joined in the laugh—though his contribution was a mere dry cackle—as he hoisted his spare body out of the saddle and climbed stiffly down.

He declined the drink, but accepted a cigar, and when this was alight to his satisfaction, he shot a sly glance at his host.

"Yu got a nice place here, Andy," he began, his eye taking in the solid, spacious bunk-house, barns, and corrals, and beyond them the level miles of grass, burnt brown and dead-looking by the summer heat, but, as he well knew, still the best of feed for cattle. Moreover, among the cottonwoods through which he had ridden was a little stream which later became a deep pool, worth in itself a small fortune in that arid land. "Yore range must mighty near reach the Double S."

"Our eastern line is their western," Andy told him, wondering what was coming. Was Raven about to make him an offer for the ranch? If so, he was doomed to disappointment; Andy would not have sold for twice the value.

Seth nodded reflectively. "Yore dad musta sunk a lot o' coin in it," he said. "This cattle business is a costly one, as I'm afindin' out; the 88 just eats money, spite of all Jevons can do to keep down expenses; which explains why I'm here."

Andy began to comprehend. "Yu want that five thousand I owe yu, is that it, Seth?" he asked.

"Partly, my boy, partly," the other assented. "I'm hatin' to press yu just now, but bein' up against it myself—" He paused a moment and went on, "Unfortunately, Andy, that ain't all; there's what yore old man had too."

"Dad? He owed yu some?" Bordene cried.

Satisfaction flickered for an instant in the visitor's eyes. He nodded and produced a paper. "Yu can see for yourself," he said.

The young rancher took the document and stared at it amazedly. It was a note of hand for fifteen thousand dollars, written out and signed by his father. Carelessly done by one who trusted others, the amount was in figures only and there was nothing to show that a deft stroke of the pen had trebled the indebtedness. For a moment he looked at it in stunned silence; it was a heavy blow, but he had enough of his sire in him to take it without wincing. He handed back the note, and said quietly:

"That's good enough, Seth. I dunno why Dad didn't tell me, but there it is. I'm payin' it, o' course, but yu'll have to wait a few weeks till I've sold the herd I'm roundin' up. I was goin' to make her a thousand strong, but it'll have to be fifteen hundred. There'll be a buyer waitin', an' I reckon they'll turn me in thirty thousand; that'll put things straight."

"Suits me," Raven returned. "I ain't aimin' to rush yu. When yu reckon to drive?"

"Soon as I can get the extra cows—say two-three days," the young man told him.

"Comin' along to-night to win some o' that dinero back?" the saloon-keeper smiled.

Bordene shook his head. "I gotta hustle," he said. "Wait till I'm outa debt an' I'll have yore hide."

The visitor nodded agreement. "Well, s'long, Andy, an' good luck with the drive," he said.

Jogging leisurely back to Lawless he gave vent to a sneering chuckle. On the assumption that old Bordene would not tell his son all his business, he had put up a bluff, and it had come off. It had been easy. "Pie like mother made," he muttered, his covetous eyes sweeping the fine grazing over which he was passing.

CHAPTER X

The marshal and his deputy, after a day of ferreting in the Tepee Mountain region, turned their horses' heads towards home. They had discovered nothing; the black was still peacefully grazing in the little valley and there were no new hoof-prints. The wind was rising and getting colder.

"Well, we ain't done much, but I reckon we'll call it a day," Green remarked. "I wanted for yu to know where that cache is in case someone takes a chance at me an' gets away with it."

They were now nearing the broad cattle-trail which led north. In the fading light they saw a cloud of dust slowly approaching from the direction of Lawless.

"Herd a-comin'," Barsay announced. "I guess it'll be young Bordene."

"Yeah," the marshal agreed, and scanned the sky with distrust. "There's a storm a-comin' too. I'm for beddin' down with Andy to-night. We got all o' twenty miles to cover, an' the bosses is tired."

"Yo're whistlin'," Pete agreed. "Gee, they're gettin' a wiggle on that herd. I'm thinkin' Andy has seen that storm too."

"An' he wants them cows good an' tired before they beds down—they won't be so easy scared then," the marshal opined.

In fact, the herd was now coming on at a good gait, and very soon the shrill cries of the cowboys and the loud bellowing of the beasts could be heard. Beneath the smother of choking dust the cattle, a compact dark mass, came on at a clumsy trot. Ahead of them a single horseman whose right hand went to his gun when he discerned the two shadowy men waiting in the trail. The marshal held up his hand palm outwards, the Indian peace sign.

"Lo, Bordene, we ain't holdin' yu up for nothin' 'cept a meal," he called out. "Lawless shore seems a long ways off. so we're aimin' to throw in with yu for the night."

"Glad to have yu, gents," the young man replied, riding aside to let the herd pass. "Fact is, I got a sorta feelin' we might have trouble an' two more men'd be plumb useful."

They sat and watched the cattle go lumbering by, the thud of thousands of hoofs shaking the ground beneath them. The horse-wrangler with the remuda followed, and the chuck-wagon, drawn by a team of mules, and driven by a dust-choked and vituperative cook, brought up the rear.

"A good gather," the marshal commented.

"The pick o' the ranch," Bordene told him. "Couldn't afford to run any risk; I gotta have the money."

"Where yu proposin' to camp?"

"In The Pocket, a little basin 'bout half a mile long; it's sheltered a bit an' there's wood, good grass, an' a pool o' water, though where that comes from the Lord on'y knows, for there ain't no stream."

"Sounds like it might 'a' bin made for yu," Pete put in.

"Shore does, but there's a string tied to it," Andy admitted. "A piece this side o' The Pocket the trail skirts Shiverin' Sand, an' if the herd stampedes an' takes the back track it'll be plain hell."

"Quicksand?" Green queried.

"Yeah, an' the oddest I ever saw," Bordene explained. "At a first glance she seems like any other bit o' desert—but when yu look close yu can see a sort o' movement, the grains o' sand slowly slippin' like there was somethin' stirrin' underneath; an' if yu shove yore arm in it seems to grip an' it's all yu can do to pull it out again. A fond farewell to any cow that gets bogged down in there, I'm tellin' yu."

"Mebbe the storm won't break," the marshal said, as they followed the herd.

Arrangements for the night were well forward when they reached the camping-place, which they did at leisure. The herd had been watered and now, under the ministrations of half a dozen circling riders, was quietly settling down at the far end of the valley. At the near end the cook had a big fire going and the busy rattle of pots and pans sent a cheerful message to tired and hungry men. Having given their mounts a drink, and picketed them, without removing the saddles, the visitors joined the loungers by the fireside.

The customary baiting of the cook was proceeding in a promising manner when a distant rumble of thunder put a sudden end to it. Anxious eyes turned skywards, where an inky, rolling mass of cloud was wiping out the stars in a steady advance. Then came a spot or two of rain.

"She's a-comin', boys, shore as shootin'," Andy said. "Better be ready for anythin' that breaks loose."

Scrambling hurriedly to, their feet, the men donned slickers, and got themselves mounted. The storm was travelling rapidly, straight towards them, each roll of thunder louder than the previous one.

"If the herd comes this way it's gotta be stopped, even if we build a wall o' cows to do it," Andy ordered. "Hell! they're getting panicky a'ready."

Between the peals of thunder they could hear the bawling of the frightened beasts and the voices of the riders striving desperately to keep them together. Andy decided that it was no use sending more men; if the six already there failed, three times the number could not succeed, and the others would be needed to stop the stampede.

"If they run north it won't be so bad," he said. "We can pick 'em up on our way."

Even as he spoke, a jagged finger of white flame split the sky, shattering the darkness for a second with a light that pained the eyes and made sight impossible. It was followed by a deafening crash overhead and a sudden deluge of frozen rain, so fast and furious that it was like a bombardment of steel rods. Huddled in their slickers, the hat-brims pulled down to shield their faces from the stinging pellets, the cowmen sat in their saddles, struggling to quiet their maddened mounts and waiting for the dreaded thunder of pounding hoofs. It did not come.

"Gosh!" Andy cried, "I believe we're a-goin' to make it."

For a moment it seemed he might be right; the storm was passing and a smaller flash of lightning showed them the herd, scared evidently and on the move, but milling. Then came something which dashed their new-born hopes.

Above the howl of the wind and the bellowing of the cattle rang out a wild, eerie yell, shrill, penetrating, unmistakable, to anyone who had heard it before. And most of the men there had.

"That's a 'Pache war-cry; what the hell's doin'?" Barsay shouted.

Before anyone could answer, the blood-curdling screech was repeated, to be followed by pistol shots and the drumming beat of thousands of frenzied feet.

"By God! they're off, boys, an' comin' this way," Bordene yelled. "Line out an' drop the leaders; if that don't stop 'em, get outa the way or keep ahead."

The sky was clearing, the rain had ceased, and by the murky light of a few stars they could see the herd, like a great black wave, sweeping down upon them. The sharp crack of rifles and revolvers mingled with the bawling of the terrified brutes and the clash of their great horns as they strove with one another in the mad rush. Many of the front line went down, but this did not stop the others, and the cowmen were forced to spur desperately for the side of the valley to avoid being trampled to death. Green and Andy, who were in the centre of the line, adopted the only alternative and swinging their horses round, raced ahead of the herd.

They reached the exit from the valley with but a few scant yards to spare, just in time; another few seconds and they would have been under the avalanche of death-dealing hoofs. Dismounting at the top of a little knoll, they watched the stream of terror-besotted brutes, heads down and running blindly, vanish in the gloom. They had done all that was possible; there was no longer any hope of saving the herd.

"We can't do a thing till daylight," Andy said moodily. "Better go an' see how the boys are makin' it."

Riding double, they made their way back to the chuck-wagon. The rain had abolished the fire, but the cook had got it going again and was boiling coffee for the group of fagged, disgruntled riders who stood around. Rusty's raised voice came to them as they approached.

"It warn't the storm," he said. "We was holdin' 'em, even after that gran'daddy of a crash; the Injun whoop touched 'em off an' a stone wall wouldn't 'a' stopped 'em then."

"'Lo, boys," Andy said. "All here?"

"Tod's missin'; we thought he was with yu," Rusty replied.

"He was, but I ain't seen him since the herd took charge. Get busy an' look around."

Gulping down their coffee, the men swung to their saddles and spread out. They soon found and brought him in, limp, battered almost beyond recognition. All knew how the tragedy had happened. Racing, like Andy and the marshal, to keep ahead of the herd, his pony had made a false step, and that was the end. Reverently they covered the still form of the boy—for he was no more—with a blanket, and turned in to snatch a few hours' needed rest. At sunrise they were in the saddle again, seeking in all directions for survivors of the stampede. They rode in couples, Andy and the marshal again pairing up. The former's face was grey and drawn; the loss of the young puncher had hit him hard. The place from which the shot had been fired was easily found—a little group of scrub-oaks, with sufficient undergrowth to conceal a horseman. The trampled ground showed shod hoof-prints, and the ends of several cigarettes indicated that the watcher had waited there for some time.

"Don't tell us much, 'cept that he wasn't a redskin," Green grumbled. "We better go an' look for yore beef, Andy." The tracks showed that on leaving the valley the herd had spread widely out. Green was heading his horse to the left when Bordene stopped him.

"Shiverin' Sands lays over there," he said. "Any cows what have gone that way would have to be dug out."

The country to the right of the trail was open range broken only by thickets and brush-filled arroyos. Emerging from one of the latter, they came upon a rider driving twenty Box B steers. The man turned at their hail, and they saw that it was Leeson. The marshal did not miss the start of alarm as he pulled up his mount and waited for them.

"Say, Bordene," he greeted, "what the hell's yore cows doin' around here? I just happened on this bunch an' was takin' 'em to the 88 'fore they rambled farther."

The explanation was plausible enough, but the marshal did not like the haste with which it was made, nor the accompanying half-grin. Andy, however, seemed to have no suspicion.

"Much obliged to yu, Leeson, for collectin' 'em," he replied. "My herd stampeded outa The Pocket in the storm last night. I reckon mebbe you'll find some more."

"Tough luck," Leeson commiserated. "Didn't know yu was drivin'. That storm was shore a cracker-jack."

"Seen any Injuns about here lately?" Green asked, and watched the man closely.

"Why, no," was the reply, and then, after a pause, "that is, I ain't actually seen any, but I come upon a fresh sign 'bout a mile or so north o' here yestiddy."

Green suspected the statement was an afterthought, concocted for the occasion, but he affected to accept it.

Bordene pointed to the cattle.

"We'll take these off yore hands, Leeson," he said. "If yu get any more tell Saul to let me know an' I'll send for 'em."

The sullen eyes of the 88 man followed them as they drove the little herd away.

He jabbed his heels into the flanks of his horse, and rocketed away over the plain in the direction of Raven's ranch.

Dusk found Bordene and his men back in the valley. The day's hard riding had resulted in the recovery of about five hundred of the scattered cows.

"An' that's all we'll get," the owner said gloomily. "The rustlers an' that blasted quicksand have got the rest, an' we'll never see hide nor hair of 'em. No use makin' the drive with this handful, boys; we'll get back to the ranch an' gather another herd."

The night passed quietly but miserably, for the loss of a comrade and the disaster of the stampede had been too much for the usually buoyant natures of the outfit. In the early morning they started the depleted herd homewards, leaving behind them, beneath a beautiful palo verde, an oblong pile of rocks. The marshal and his deputy rode in the other direction, and, at the far end of the valley, found what they were seeking—the spot where the stampede had been stationed. Behind a sharp ridge the soft ground was scored and trampled.

"Shod hosses an' men wearin' boots," Green commented. "I had a notion that Injun yell warn't just the genuine article."

Beyond a few spent shells there was nothing else, and though they tried to follow the tracks, they soon lost them in the welter of the main trail. Giving up the task as hopeless, they followed the herd. The marshal was very silent; he was remembering that Leeson had used the Apache cry that night in the Red Ace.

CHAPTER XI

Long before the remnant of the trail herd had got back to the Box B the news of the disaster had come to the Red Ace. On the afternoon following the stampede, a Mexican rider, who had approached the town by devious ways, slipped into the private office. Raven's small black eyes gleamed maliciously as he listened to the messenger's tale. When the man had gone Raven sat thinking for a while, and then, taking his hat, sauntered down the street. Lawless boasted only one bank. Built of 'dobe bricks, with walls three feet in thickness, it presented an appearance, at least, of solidity. The manager, Lemuel Potter, who was commonly regarded as also the owner, possessed one of those curious neuter personalities which caused him to be neither liked nor disliked. He was a pompous person, fond of affecting a superiority which imposed on some and amused others, but he was reputed to be straight in his dealings. It was into this building that Raven turned, and, with a nod to the clerk behind the counter, walked through the door marked "Manager." At the sight of his visitor, Potter stood up, and then as suddenly sat down again.

"Afternoon, Potter," the saloon-keeper said, and, not troubling to remove his hat, took a seat and lit a cigar. "How's Andy Bordene's account stand?"

The manager's fleshy, clean-shaven face flushed, and with some attempt at dignity he replied: "It is against all rules, Mr. Raven, for a bank to disclose the affairs of a customer."

The saloon-keeper looked at him with an expression of amused contempt.

"Come down to earth, yu worm," he said cuttingly. "It suits me that folk should think yu own this place, but yu know better. Don't put any frills on with me or I'll trim yu good an' plenty, Mr. Rutson." The man's cheeks became deathly white and his portly form seemed to shrink in his clothes at the name he hated to hear. Raven chuckled at the effect he had produced. "I asked yu a question, Mr.—Potter," he added, and laughed again when the other winced at the pause. Utterly cowed, Potter went into the outer office and consulted a ledger.

"Bordene is overdrawn five thousand," he announced. "I saw him a few days ago and I understood that the sale of his herd would put him right."

Raven grinned sardonically. "Mebbe, but he's lost most of the cows in a stampede," he said. "Now listen to me. Bordene is in a hole an' he'll be comin' to yu. Let him have thirty thousand on his ranch but tie him up tight. Yu understand?"

"Yes—sir," the manager replied.

The title of respect only brought a sneer to the visitor's lips. "See to it then, an' keep yore mouth shut or—I'll open mine," he growled, and went out.

Potter paled again at the threat, but he said nothing; he knew he was hopelessly in the power of this man. With trembling hands he lighted a cigarette, and, as he had done so many times, sat there trying to find some means of escape.

* * *

Two days later Bordene, having brought his salvaged herd safely back to the Box B, was sitting in Raven's office, telling the story of the ill-fated drive. The elder man listened with a sympathetic expression.

"So yu saved 'bout a third of 'em," he commented. "Well, that's somethin'. But yu was shore playin' in pore luck, an' it hits us both. I told yu how I'm fixed, an' I was dependin' on yu gettin' that money. What yu aim to do?"

"Scratch up another bunch—it won't be such a good one—an' try again. I've sent word to my buyer."

"That means waitin'—which I can't do. Why not see Potter? He'll let yu have the ready on yore ranch, an' that'll give yu time to turn round; yu can easy get clear when yu sell yore cows. I don't want to ride yu, Andy, but I'm bein' rode myself."

So because it seemed the only way out, and to avoid letting down one whom he deemed to be a friend, Andy went to the bank, and the man who had advised him to do so grinned felinely when he was gone. Once he held the mortgage, he would see that Bordene got deeper in the mire, and in the end the Box B would be his. Things had not quite come out as he had planned, but perhaps it was as well. It meant some delay, but his Indian blood had endowed him with patience. Andy had been profuse in his praise of his preserver, and presently the saloon-keeper went in search of him. He found the marshal and his deputy lolling in the door of their dwelling.

"Any news, marshal?" he asked.

"Bordene came from the Red Ace a piece ago, so I'm figurin' yu musta heard it all," Green told him.

"I got his account, but I thought yu might 'a' noticed some-thin' he missed," Raven replied.

"Andy didn't miss nothin' 'cept a visit to the next world, an' not that by so awful much," Green smiled. "Them war-whoops had it framed up pretty neat."

"Yu reckon it was Injuns?" the other asked casually.

"Seemed so, didn't it, Pete?" the marshal said.

"Shore did," the deputy lied with ready alacrity. He did not know what Green's game was, but he was prepared to back it to the limit.

"It's rough on Bordene, comin' on top o' the old man bein' rubbed out," the saloon-keeper said reflectively. "Yu ain't struck the trail o' Mister Sudden yet?"

"Somebody musta told yu," the marshal said satirically. "Me an' Pete was tryin' to keep that a secret."

If Raven appreciated the pleasantries his wooden face did not betray it. "What's come o' that no-'count Injun yu fetched in?" he enquired.

"Oh, he's around," the marshal said carelessly.

"Send him on his way; this town don't want his kind," Raven growled harshly.

At this order—for it was nothing else—the marshal's lounging form straightened. "He's workin' for me," he said quietly.

For an instant the black eyes tried to stare down the grey-blue ones—and failed. Nevertheless, no trace of rancour appeared in his voice as he replied:

"Oh, well, if yu can use him—but yu'll be responsible."

Pete spat disgustedly as his gaze followed the saloon-keeper down the street. "That damn war-whoop is shore gettin' yu some friends," he said. "What is he a-doin' anyways?"

For immediately they had reached Lawless again the Mohave had vanished, taking his horse and gun. The marshal's grin was provoking.

"Curiosity brought sin into the world, Tubby," he said. "If Eve hadn't wondered about that apple—"

"Oh, go to blazes," the deputy rudely retorted, and stamped into the kitchen to make coffee. He was enjoying this half an hour later when his friend strode into the office.

"Come an' get yore hoss. Black Feather is back an' we got some ridin' to do," the marshal told him.

"Ridin'? This time o' the day? Why, it'll be dark in two-three hours," the other expostulated. "Where we goin'?"

"All the way there an' back again," was the non-committal explanation. "Yo're gettin' fatter'n a hawg, loafin' around; yu want exercise."

"Yo're a trifler with the truth—I don't want nothin' o' the kind," Pete said. "'Cause yu look like a scraped shin-bone yu think everybody oughta."

They found the Indian waiting for them at the corral, and having secured their own mounts, set out. Keeping, at the marshal's suggestion, behind the houses, they slipped out of town unobserved. The redskin led the way due west, riding at a smart clip. Several miles of semi-desert were covered in silence and then Pete's patience came to an end. He shot an oblique glance at the long, silent figure riding beside him, and said: "S'pose yu spill some o' the beautiful thoughts millin' in yore majestic mind, an' tell us where we're at?"

"I'm hopin' to find some o' Bordene's cows for him," the marshal said. "Black Feather don't talk much."

"Yo're damn right, he don't," Pete agreed. "Yu'd think words was a dollar each he's that sparlin' of 'em, an' yo're pretty near as bad."

The approach of night found them threading a tumbled tract of country which was new to both the white men. Their guide rode stolidly on, twisting and turning without hesitation, though they could see no trail. At length they emerged from an arroyo and saw a trampled track stretching away to the right and left. Black Feather slid down and examined the ground closely in the fading light. He rose with a grunt of satisfaction.

"No come—yet," he said. "We wait."

He pointed to the thick underbrush at the mouth of the arroyo out of which they had ridden, and, leading the horses, they ensconced themselves behind it. An hour passed and Green was beginning to fear that the Indian had made a mistake when the distant bellow of cattle broke the silence. The moon was rising now, and peering through the bushes, they could see on the plain a dark blur which was coming nearer. Then came the dull tramp of hoofs and the low calls of the riders. Mounting their horses, the watchers waited until the herd began to file past at a tired trot. The man riding point on the left of the cattle was Leeson. The marshal forced his horse into the open.

"'Lo, Leeson," he said.

Like a flash the man twisted in the saddle, his hand streaking to his hip, but it came away as quickly when he recognized the officer. Under the flapping brim of his hat the narrowed eyes looked vicious, but for the moment he could find nothing to say. Then reflecting that the new-comer was apparently alone, he blurted out:

"What the hell yu doin' here?"

"I'm good an' lost," the marshal smiled. "Yu see, I ain't very acquainted with these parts yet." He raised his voice:

"Yu can show yoreself, Pete; it's some o' the 88 boys."

Leeson's face lowered as the deputy and the Indian appeared. "What's the bright idea, hidin' yoreselves an' bustin' out thisaway?" he growled.

"We didn't know who yu was," the marshal explained sweetly. "Yu mighta been Greasers or—rustlers."

The cattle were still moving slowly on. There was a rider on the right point and two more behind. The marshal cast a casual glance at a passing beast.

"Box B, huh?" he commented. "Where'd yu find 'em?"

"Spraddled all over our range," the man said sullenly.

"An' yo're takin' 'em back to Andy, huh?" Green continued. "Well, that's right kind o' Jevons, I gotta admit, but ain't yu goin' a long ways round? Yu'll be over the Border 'fore yu know it."

"Thought yu didn't savvy the country," sneered the 88 man.

"Oh, I got a sort o' general idea. The Box B, I figure, lies well to the left o' here, don't it?"

Leeson nodded sulkily. "We turn off a piece along. This is an easier way if mebbe a bit farther."

"Tricky drivin' at night," the marshal pursued, and his tone conveyed a question.

"I reckoned to make it in daylight, but we had trouble," the other explained. "Well, I gotta be movin'. So long." He spurred his horse after the herd, but in two jumps the marshal was beside him.

"We'll come an' give a hand," he said. "Four ain't enough for a bunch this size—must be all four hundred."

"We can handle 'em," Leeson said, his tone expressing anything but gratitude. "Yu needn't trouble."

"No trouble a-tall, ol'-timer," Green said pleasantly. "We're goin' yore way."

With a muttered curse the 88 man rode to the head of the herd. He had sensed that the marshal was playing with him, that his presence there was not accidental, but he could see no way of ridding himself of the unwelcome assistance. The cows must now be taken to their rightful owner instead of being handed over to El Diablo, whose men were waiting for them just across the line. Had the interloper been alone—His brows met in a heavy frown. "Head 'em for Bordene's ranch," he called out to the man on the right, and gritted out an oath as he saw the marshal and his companions helping to swing the cows round so that they faced east instead of south.

"This'll shore be a joyful surprise for Bordene," Pete said genially. "He oughta be real grateful to yu fellas."

The journey was resumed in a silence broken only by the bawling of the cows and an occasional curse from one of the drivers when an animal tried to break away. But there was little of this, the poor brutes being too footsore and weary to do more than lurch along. Faint streaks of light behind the hills heralded the dawn, and the sun was rimming the ridges of the distant ranges with gold when the Box B was sighted. Leaving the herd in charge of the others, Leeson, with Green and Barsay, rode up to the ranch-house. A hail brought out the owner.

"Well, damn me!" he cried. "Whatever are yu doin' here?"

"I've fetched back some o' yore cattle, Bordene," the 88 man told him. "Found 'em mixed up with our'n. We picked up the marshal on the way."

The young rancher's face lighted up at the sight of the herd. "It's mighty decent o' Jevons," he said. "If he'd let me know I'd 'a' sent for 'em, an' glad o' the chance. 'Light an' eat, all o' yu; my boys'll take care o' the herd."

Green, his deputy, Leeson, and their host took breakfast at the ranch-house, the rest eating with the Box B riders. During the meal the 88 man gave again the explanation he had already given the marshal. Bordene was warm in his thanks.

"I'm a lot obliged to yu, Leeson," he said.

"Shucks! Couldn't do nothin' else," that worthy replied uncomfortably, and Green smothered a chuckle; the fellow was, unintentionally, speaking the sober truth.

"Yu ain't struck the trail o' any 'Paches, I'm guessin'?" the marshal asked.

Leeson looked at him with sudden suspicion. "Yore guessin's good," he returned. "Reckon they'd get away with the

beef plenty quick."

As soon as the meal was over Leeson got up. "Have to be p'intin' for home—Jevons'll be lookin' for us," he said, and with an unpleasant grin, "an' we'll take the old road; them round-about routes don't seem to pay."

"Crooked trails rarely do, Leeson," the marshal told him.

They watched the 88 men disappear in the distance, and then the marshal leaned back in his chair and laughed.

Barsay caught the infection, and the rancher regarded them in blank amazement.

"Let me in on the joke, boys," he pleaded. "I ain't had much to be merry about lately, yu know."

"Sorry, Andy, but it was just too funny to see yu squanderin' gratitude on that fella an' rubbin' a sore spot every time yu thanked him," Green explained. "Fact is, if it hadn't been for me, Pete, an' the Injun, yore cows would 'a' been over the Border hours back. Runnin' across Leeson an' that handful o' steers put the idea in my head, an' I sent Black Feather to keep an eye on the 88. He fetched us just in time."

"The damned skunks!" Andy exploded. "Do yu figure Jevons is in it?"

"Can't say," the marshal admitted. "Don't see how Leeson an' his men could get away with such a herd without the foreman knowin'."

"Seems hardly possible," Bordene agreed.

"Raven owns the 88, don't he?" Pete asked meaningly.

"Yeah, but I can't believe he'd have any hand in this," Andy replied. "Lots o' people don't like him, but he's my friend, an', besides, there was a good reason for him wantin' my drive to go through; I was sellin' to pay a debt to him, an' he wanted the money."

"Then he's still shy of it?" Green asked.

"Nope. I borrowed from the bank an' paid him," Bordene said. "He told me he had to have it."

The marshal was silent for a while, and then he said, "So he's got his coin, an' if he was in this steal he'd be the value o' those steers to the good, huh?"

"That's so, of course, but I can't think it of Seth," the young man replied. "He's hard, an' he wants his pound o' flesh, but he ain't crooked."

Green let it go at that. After all, he had no proof that the saloon-keeper was anything but what he seemed. He had plenty to think about on the journey back to Lawless, and Pete did not enjoy the ride.

CHAPTER XII

The marshal's doubts as to Raven's participation in the attempted rustling would have been speedily dissolved had he been present when the news arrived at the 88. Jevons was angry—for his own pocket was affected—but he was also alarmed. Two hours' riding brought him to the Red Ace. Entering by the back door, he sent in a message to the proprietor, who was playing poker. Raven rose instantly.

"Leave me out for a spell; got sornethin' to 'tend to," he excused, and went to his office.

Here he found his foreman waiting, and it needed no second glance to see that he had come in a hurry and on no pleasant errand. The cards had proved unkind to Raven and he was in an ill mood.

"What's the matter now, Jevons?" he growled.

The man told the story just as he had it from Leeson, and the saloon-keeper's usually impassive face grew stormy as he realized the possible consequences of the disaster.

"Yu blunderin' fool," he hissed. "Why didn't vu go yoreself instead o' sendin' that mutton-head?"

"What difference would that 'a' made anyhow?" Jevons retorted. "Lookit, the marshal finds us drivin' four hundred Box B steers; what else was there to tell him? Let's hear what yu'd 'a' done; shoot 'em down, huh?"

Raven sensed that he was going too far; the man was too useful a tool to lose. Moreover, looking at the problem Leeson had to face more coolly, he could not but admit the only possible solution had been found. Tactfully he turned his wrath in another direction.

"Blast that marshal, he's allus hornin' in on what don't concern him," he snarled. "What was he doin' over there?"

"Waitin' for the herd, Leeson reckons," the foreman said. "Some way he got on to it, though I'm blamed if I know how."

Raven was silent, remembering something. "I can tell yu," he said. "That pesky Indian nosed it out; Green said he was usin' him."

"Yu don't often make a mistake in pickin' a man, boss, but yu shore slipped up on that marshal," Jevons said acidly.

"Mistakes can frequently be rectified," his employer told him. "Leeson don't like Green much, does he?"

"Not that yu'd notice," returned the foreman, adding with an ugly smile as he read the other's mind, "I'm bettin' he'd like five hundred bucks a good deal more."

"He can choose between 'em," the saloon-keeper said meaningly. "Tell him I said so. Anybody see yu ride in?" The foreman shook his head. "Slip out quiet an' get back to the ranch," Raven added, and returned to his cards. The 88 man was wrong in supposing he had not been seen. A pair of black, vigilant eyes, from a little depression fifty yards to the rear of the Red Ace, had watched both his arrival and departure. Black Feather was still working for the marshal.

* * *

Early on the following afternoon a musical call of "Hello, the house," appraised Bordene that he had a visitor. Stepping out on the veranda, he saw Tonia, astride a mettlesome little mustang. She jumped down and trailed the reins when he appeared.

"Why, Tonia, what good angel fetched you?" he cried.

She sat down in the chair he pushed forward, accepted a glass of water from the olla hanging in the porch, and then turned a serious face to her host.

"I haven't seen you since your drive failed, Andy," she said. "It was bad luck."

"Might 'a' been worse—barrin' Tod," the young man replied. "I got nearly two-thirds of 'em back in the end," and went on to relate the story of the strays from the 88.

"So your cows were headed for Mexico," she said thoughtfully. "Andy, what do you think of the marshal?"

"I reckon he's white," Bordene replied.

"I like him too," she said. "I went in once or twice to see that sick Indian he rescued; the man just worships him."

"Hey, Tonia, don't yu go lavishin' too much affection on Green," Bordene cried; and though he spoke in mock alarm, there was again an undertone of concern in his voice.

The girl detected it and was thrilled. Adopting his own manner of speech, she said teasingly, "I shorely gotta be grateful when a fella helps yu, ain't I?" Before he could reply, she was sober again. "Andy, how much do you owe Raven?"

"Who's been tellin' yu—" he began, and paused.

"The same little old bird," she smiled.

"Reg'lar poll-parrot, that bird," Bordene commented. "Well, here's the straight of it, Tonia. I did owe Seth money an' was aimin' to pay when I sold the herd. When the drive was busted I had to borrow from the bank on mortgage."

"I don't like that," she said. "Why didn't you come to us?"

Bordene shook his head and she rose to go. "It'll be all right, Tonia," he assured her. "Potter is straight, an' when I've sold my cows I can square up. I'll see yu a piece on the way."

The girl laughed at him. "Do you think I'm an Eastern miss to want shepherdin'?" she asked. Then she held out her hand. "Don't trust Raven too much, Andy," she said earnestly.

With a wave and a smile, she wheeled the pony and was off. The young rancher watched her, something more than admiration in his eyes. Then he looked at his dwelling-place and spoke aloud:

"It ain't good enough for her, an' I ain't good enough neither, but, by God, we're agoin' to be, both of us."

Meanwhile, the subject of this pious resolution was loping steadily in the direction of her own ranch. She had crossed the miles of open plain and reached a strip of rougher country which formed one of the boundaries of the Box B when, at the end of a long, narrow ravine, she saw a rider approaching. One glance was enough—there was no mistaking the flaming scarlet tunic, with its wealth of gold braid glittering in the bright sun. Though she had seen him but once, Tonia knew that it was El Diablo, the man whom Andy had treated so cavalierly in Lawless. With a shiver of apprehension she sought a means of avoiding the meeting, but it was too late; he must already have seen her. So she rode on, endeavouring to appear unconcerned, hoping that by a display of indifference she might get past. But when she was a few yards distant the man pulled his mount across, barring her path, and swept the sombrero from his head.

"Buenos dias, señorita," he said, and in her own tongue he added, "Miss Sarel ride all alone, huh?"

"As you see, señor," the girl replied. "I must ask you to excuse me; I am in haste."

"The señorita was not hurrying when I see her," he replied meaningly. "A lady so beautiful must also be kind-hearted and grant a few meenits to her so great admirer."

"I have no time to spare, and—I do not know you, señor," Tonia returned.

The guerrilla captain bowed low over the neck of his magnificent mount. "No?" he smiled. "Then we must—how you say?—become acquaint. In the absence of Meester Bordene I present myself, Don Luis Moraga, a caballero of Old Spain, and at your feet."

"'In my way' would be more correct, señor," the girl retorted. "As for Mr. Bordene, I am expecting him to overtake me, and he may have friends with him."

The man laughed mockingly. "I too have friends here, señorita," he said, and tapped the butts of the silver-mounted

pistols thrust through his sash.

"I must repeat, señor, that I am in haste," she said coldly. "A caballero would not detain me."

Moraga grinned hatefully as he forced his horse to her side. "The señorita is at liberty to go—when she have paid, oh, so small a ransom," he said. "One leetle kees—"

Tonia's eyes and cheeks flamed at the insult. Heedless of her helplessness, she gripped the quirt dangling by a thong from her wrist, and cried:

"Lay a finger on me, you yellow dog, and I'll thrash you."

The contemptuous epithet stung the Mexican to fury; his face became that of a devil indeed. "Dios!" he hissed, "you shall pay for that." He snatched at her wrist, but she jumped her horse aside and swung the whip. Moraga cursed as the lash seared his cheek, but before she could strike again his claw-like hands were sinking into her flesh and he was dragging her from the saddle, his snarling lips, like a ravening wolf's, close to her own. Panting for breath, she fought on, but could not loosen that iron grip, and her strength was well-nigh spent when a cold, rasping voice said:

"Put 'em up, Greaser, an' pronto!"

Moraga flashed round, his hands going to his guns, but when he saw who had spoken they went above his head instead; he knew better than to try and beat the marshal of Lawless to the draw. Green, lounging in his saddle, surveyed the ruffian sardonically.

"Gettin' whipped seems to be a habit o' yours," he commented, his gaze on the angry crimson stripe across the man's face. Green turned to the girl. "Has he hurt yu?" he asked.

"No, I'm only frightened," she replied.

"Ride on a piece, Miss Sarel," he said. "I'll be along."

She divined the menace beneath the casual request. "What are you going to do?" she questioned.

"Kill a snake," he said coolly.

"No, no," she protested. "He's a Mexican and didn't understand. Please let him go."

The marshal shrugged his broad shoulders. "I oughta wiped him out the first time," he said. "Very well, ma'am, but he's gotta have a lesson. Get off yore hoss an' stand over there," he directed the Mexican, pointing to a spot about ten paces distant, and when the command had been sullenly obeyed, he added, "An' stand mighty still if yu want to see another sunrise."

He got down himself and drawing the two pistols from the bandit's sash, stepped back. For a moment he paused, weighing the weapons, and then the gun in his right hand roared and the brooch in Moraga's sombrero was torn from its place; a second shot ripped away the bullion band, while the third left the wearer bareheaded. Livid, but a statue of stone for stillness, the victim stood while, with incredible swiftness, shot followed shot in a continual stream. The golden epaulettes dropped from his shoulders; his belt, the buckle shattered by a bullet, fell away; the great silver spurs were wrenched from his heels. Having emptied the borrowed pistols the marshal flung them down and drew his own.

"Keep still," he warned, and stepped round so that he sighted his target sideways.

This time he used both guns, firing them alternately with such speed that the reports sounded like a roll of thunder. One by one the gilt buttons of the scarlet tunic leapt off, and only when the last dropped to the ground did the devilish tattoo cease. From the Mexican's chalky-white face, eyes in which fear and hate commingled glared at this smoke-wreathed, grim-lipped man who shot like a wizard. In those few moments Moraga had died twenty times, expecting each bullet to be the last, and his nerve-racked body was shivering despite the sun blazing overhead. The marshal reloaded his guns and slid them into the holsters.

"Yu can thank the señorita for yore life, Moraga," he said sternly. "Stay yore own side o' the line; she may not be there to beg yu off next time. Vamos!"

He swung into his saddle and joined Tonia.

"How can I thank you?" she asked. "I'm not easily scared, but that fellow was—horrible!"

"Just forget it," Green smiled. "This is part o' my job as marshal; but yu didn't oughta ride alone around here—it's too near the Border."

"Andy wanted to come, but I wouldn't let him," she explained. "He's busy—he has to be, after so much misfortune. Do you believe in luck, Mr. Green?"

"Shore, I've met her," was the reply. The girl's look of surprise brought a grin to his lips. "Luck must be a lady to play the pranks she does, yu know," he explained.

Tonia laughed with him. "I don't think Andy is one of her favourites," she speculated.

"Mebbe not, just now, but I've a hunch he's goin' to be one o' the luckiest fellas in Arizona," the marshal said, and smiled when he saw the colour in his companion's cheeks.

When they reached the Double S, Reuben Sarel emerged from his favoured corner on the veranda to greet them.

"Glad to see yu, marshal," he cried. "Why, Tonia, what's the matter?"

In a few words she told of her adventure, and the fat man's expression became serious. "I'm thankin' yu, marshal," he said. "We'll have to keep an eye liftin' at the Double S. By all accounts, El Diablo is a poisonous piece o' work, an' he'll move heaven an' hell to square hisself. Gosh! I'd 'a' give somethin' to see yu strippin' off his finery."

"I never saw such shooting—it was wonderful," Tonia said.

"Well, mebbe yu put a scare into him, but I doubt it," Sarel went on. "These damn Greasers have their own sneaky ways o' gettin' back at yu. Wonder if he bumped off Bordene?"

"Possible, o' course, but I got no reason to think so," the marshal replied. "Yu losin' any cows?"

The fat man opened his eyes. "Yeah, but I ain't been advertisin' it," he said. "There seems to be a steady leak—few at a time, an' I can't trace it. Any reason for askin'?"

"Just a notion," Green assured him. "Tell yu later if I get to know anythin'."

On his way back to town he pondered over the bit of information. It had been purely a shot in the dark, but it opened up a new line of investigation for the morrow. Looking at the Double S brand on the rump of Miss Sarel's mount, it had suddenly struck him how very simply it could be changed, with the aid of a wet blanket and a running iron, into a passable 88. He slapped the neck of the black horse.

"Yu ol' son of a sweep," he told it. "Things is gettin' right interestin' in this neck o' the woods."

CHAPTER XIII

Riding along the street, the marshal noticed that his appearance was creating unusual interest; men he knew greeted him boisterously, and others, though silent, looked at him curiously. It was not until he reached his quarters that he learned the reason. Barsay's chubby countenance was one broad grin.

"So yu've had another fandango with Mister Moraga?" he burst out, and the marshal swore.

"Hell's bells! Has that got around?"

"Shore thing. I just slips into the Red Ace to see if they'd run outa whisky—which they hadn't—an' there's a Box B puncher called Fatty tellin' the town all about it. Seems he was up on one side o' the ravine, afraid to shoot in case he hit the gel, an' no way o' gettin' down. He sees Tonia use her quirt—which she ain't lackin' sand any—an' the Mexican grab her. Yu oughta seen them fellas when he told how yu stood that jay-bird up an' shot the clothes off'n him. Me, I'm hopin' yu remembered there was a lady present. 'Shoot?' sez Fatty. 'Gents, I never seen the like. They say Sudden is fast, but I'm bettin' the marshal would have to wait for him.' They all laughed at that, but not so hearty as I did. Fatty said yu shot all over him, an' with his own guns."

The marshal nodded. "He'll certainly have to steal another outfit; I plumb ruined that one," he admitted.

"That's the worst o' yu fancy gun-slingers," Pete said quizzically, "Now if I'd tried to lift his hat for him I'd 'a' bin inches too low. Say, Raven an' one or two others warn't exactly joinin' in the jubilation."

"I'm afraid he won't like it," the marshal said. "I'll be some grieved if that's so."

"Like hell yu will," grinned the deputy, undecieved by the sober tone which the twinkling eyes belied. "Gripes! here he comes. It's me for the kitchen."

Raven entered at the moment the deputy disappeared, storm signals flying on his visually impassive features. He did not beat about the bush.

"Hear yu've had another clash with Moraga."

The marshal nodded. "I found him tryin' to drag Miss Sarel from her saddle an' had to admonish him some."

"I reckon I made a mistake over yu, Green," the other scowled. "Yu ain't exactly a shinin' success as a marshal, are yu? Sudden gets away with a stage robbery an' a murder, an' all yu do to get the town in bad with a fella strong enough to wipe it out if he takes the notion."

"Yu tryin' to tell me that Lawless will lie down to be trampled on by that Greaser an' his band o' thieves?" the marshal asked.

"No, the damn idjuts would pant for war immediate," Raven admitted crossly. "What I'm drivin' at is that it's bad business. I ain't a fightin' fool. I'm here to make coin, an' I reckoned yu was too."

"Shore, but I'm a mite particular where it comes from," Green told him. "Mexican money don't appeal to me."

The saloon-keeper regarded him with puzzled exasperation. Was he simply stupid, or playing a part? Raven could not determine, but one point stood out plainly—the marshal was not a tool to be used.

"Mebbe yu won't like Mex bullets neither," he sneered. "Yu better tell the town to get organized', Moraga's got a good memory."

"Then he'll stay on his own side o' the line, like I told him," the marshal said. "If he don't, you'll lose a customer for yore cows."

The other made no reply, but his brows were bent in a heavy frown as he went out. When the coast was clear, the deputy sidled in, his face one broad grin.

"He ain't a bit pleased with his li'l marshal, is he? No, sir, li'l marshal has got him guessin', an' he's got li'l marshal guessin', an' there yu are."

They went out, and on their way down the street turned into the largest store to get tobacco. Loder, the proprietor, an old but hard-bitten product of the West, welcomed them with an outstretched, hairy hand.

"Shake, marshal," he said. "I just bin hearin' how yu took the conceit outa that Greaser, an' I'm tellin' yu the town is plenty pleased."

At Durley's they got a confirmation of the store-keeper's opinion, both from the owner of the place and from several citizens. The marshal's moderation only was criticized. "Yu shore oughta shook some lead into him," was Durley's comment. "Allus scotch a snake is my motter." Listening to this prudent sentiment, Green could not know that within a week or so he would be heartily wishing he had put it into practice, but so it was.

Following up the notion that had come to him on his way back from the Sarel ranch, the marshal spent the whole of the next morning exploring the country east of the 88, his interest being in the brands of such cattle as he encountered. Though he found nothing suspicious he persevered in his quest.

"It would be easy as takin' a drink, an' if Jevons is honest he's shore got a misleadin' face," he muttered.

Though he was many miles from the Double S, he was working in that direction, passing over a level expanse of good grass, gashed here and there with little gullies. From one of these came the bellow of a steer, and forcing his way in, the marshal found that the trees ringed a grassy, saucer-like depression, in the middle of which was a rough corral. Riding down to the enclosure, one glance told him he had found what he sought—stolen stock. There were about a score of cows in the corral and the brand on them had been recently worked over, transforming a Double S into an 88. The dead ashes of a fire afforded further proof. Regaining the level, the marshal loped leisurely in the direction of the town, turning over his discovery. That Raven, as owner of the 88, was in on the steal, he had not the slightest doubt, but the trouble was to prove it.

"Cuss the luck," he soliloquized. "I'm findin' nothin' but loose ends."

He was crossing a little tree-covered plateau from which a gravelly stretch of ground sloped gently down when a slug sang past his ear, followed by the report of a revolver. Instantly he flung himself headlong to the earth, falling so that he lay behind a convenient boulder. Some sixty yards down the decline wisps of blue smoke showed that the shot came from behind a low bush, apparently the only cover the spot offered. Nigger, smacked on the rump when his master dived for shelter, had retreated into the trees behind. At one side the chunk of rock did not touch the ground, and this provided the marshal with a peep-hole through which he could watch events. Motionless, with gun drawn, he waited, but nothing happened.

"He's wonderin' if he got me," Green muttered. "Well, I ain't tellin' him."

Another ten minutes passed, and first the crown and then the brim of a black sombrero edged into view above the bush. The marshal chuckled softly; he knew there was no head inside the hat and declined to be drawn. The hat vanished and the bush became slightly agitated, but the silence remained unbroken. Another interval and abruptly from behind the bush, a man stood up, pistol in hand; it was Leeson.

He weapon ready for instant use, he stepped from his cover and began to mount the slope. The marshal waited until he was too far from the bush to regain it and then rose noiselessly to his feet.

"Reach for the sky, Leeson; I'm coverin' yu," he called.

The man flung up his arms as ordered.

When he had sworn himself to a standstill, the marshal spoke:

"Chuck yore weapons ahead o' yu."

He watched while a gun and a knife curved through the air towards him.

"What's the idea?" Leeson snarled, and then, as though he had just discovered the identity of his opponent, "Why, damn me if it ain't the marshal."

Green picked up the surrendered weapons. "Yu didn't know, o' course," he said sarcastically.

"An' that's a fact," Leeson replied. "I took yu for that road-agent fella, Sudden; that black hoss o' yores—"

"Ain't got a white face," the marshal reminded.

"That's so. I oughta remembered," the other agreed readily. "Well, mistakes will happen, but there's no harm done; I'm glad I didn't get yu, marshal."

"I'm a mite pleased about that my own self," the officer admitted. "I got yu instead, an' I'm takin' yu in."

Leeson stared at him in anger and amazement, the latter well simulated. "Ain't I explained it was a mistake?" he demanded.

"Folks have to pay for 'em in this hard world, fella," the marshal told him. "Where's yore hoss?"

"Bottom o' the slope—in the brush," the man replied, and then, "Lookit, marshal—"

"Get a-goin'," Green cut in. "Yu can sing yore little song on the way."

A low whistle brought Nigger stepping sedately towards them. The marshal climbed into the saddle and with his drawn pistol motioned the prisoner to proceed. They found the horse, and Leeson mounted.

"Seth'll have a word to say 'bout this," he growled, and for the rest of the journey maintained a sullen silence. On reaching town, the marshal handed the captive over to his assistant and went in search of Raven. He found him in his private room at the saloon.

"Leeson tried to bushwhack me this afternoon," he said bluntly. "I fetched him in—alive."

For one fleeting second the man's face betrayed an emotion, but whether it was surprise, anger, or disappointment, the marshal could not determine; then it was gone, and the cold, passionless mask was back again.

"Leeson shot at yu? Whatever for?" he asked.

"Pure affection, don't you reckon?" Green returned flippantly, and then, "He claims he took me for Sudden."

"Well, that's likely enough too," Raven returned. "Yu better get rid o' that black hoss. As for Leeson, I'd turn him loose, in yore place."

"If yu want I should—" the marshal began.

"I don't give a damn; the fella's just one o' my hands—not too good a one at that," Raven retorted, adding carelessly, "His tale will clear him with most."

Green nodded and came away. At the office he found Pete and the prisoner chatting amiably. When handed his weapons and informed that he was at liberty to depart, a sneering grin further disfigured Leeson's features.

"Got yore orders from Seth, huh?" he said.

"Don't push yore luck too hard, fella," the marshal replied caustically.

When he had gone Barsay burst into a roar of merriment, and it was some moments before he could explain.

"He's bin tellin' me how yu turned the tables on him," he said. "An' he was as solemn as an undertaker at his own funeral; reckons yu got no right to monkey with citizens thataway, an' I had to listen without a smile; I near died."

"It was shorely funny," the marshal grinned. "Just the same, he damn near got me."

"You oughta abolished him right away," Pete said disgustedly. "Where's the sense in totin' him in?"

"Wanted to see what line Raven would take," Green replied. "But he warn't makin' presents to-day. As hard to catch as a greased snake, that fella. The 88 is rustlin' Double S cows. What yu make o' that?"

"I ain't surprised a-tall," Pete told him. "That gang at the 88 ain't got enough honesty to protect a plugged peso, I've a hunch Mister Raven is swingin' a wide loop."

In which conjecture Pete was undoubtedly correct, but as to how wide the said loop was neither of them had, as yet, the smallest conception.

CHAPTER XIV

Seth Raven was paying a visit, and though attired as usual, a careful observer might have noted that his sallow face was newly shaven, his shirt and collar clean, and his black coat and boots brushed. Slumped in his saddle, with a loose rein, he jogged steadily along the eastern trail on his way to the Double S. From every tree and shrub came the chatter and piping of the birds.

For the saloon-keeper the beauties of Nature had no appeal; his mind was wholly absorbed by material considerations. The move he was about to make was one he had long deliberated, being, in fact, the coping-stone of all his plannings. He would have to walk warily—to-day's expedition was merely the first step—but Raven had the patience of the red woman who had borne him; he could plant seed and wait, uncomplainingly, for it to mature and flower. Over-eagerness was the fault of a fool, and therefore, as he reflected sardonically, the weakness of the majority of mankind. Money, and the power that money provides, would put him in the position to treat white men as they had so often treated him—like dirt. And he thirsted for it. Cold, calculating, ruthless, this passion of prolonged hate made him inhuman.

By the time he had covered the open range and reached the ranch-house the sun's rays were slanting down like beams of flame and the shaded veranda was a comforting sight. An even more pleasant one was the girl standing upon it, though there was no welcoming smile on her face; she had early discovered the identity of the visitor.

"Mornin', Miss Tonia. No need to ask after yore health," the saloon-keeper greeted, as he got down and tied his steed.

The girl returned the salutation, adding, "You want to see my uncle, of course."

"No, 'of course' about it when yo're around," Raven replied with clumsy gallantry. "But, as a matter o' fact, there's a bit o' business I wanta talk over with him. Ah, here he is. 'Lo, Reub, how are yu?"

"Mornin', Seth. Hot, ain't it? Here, have a seat an' a 'smile.' Too bad I can't offer yu a decent drink. Tonia, fetch this fella some of his own poison."

The saloon-keeper was only half-listening. He was watching the girl, admiring the lithe grace of her every movement, savouring the appeal of her slim, rounded form, and feeling again the fury of hate stir in him as he reflected that she would regard him as little better than a full-blooded Apache, and somewhat lower in the scale of humanity than Moraga. Having set the liquor on the table she went away.

"Here's how," Sarel said, adding with a shade of anxiety in his tone, "What's brung yu, Seth?"

Raven did not reply at once; he was taking in his surroundings, noting the solidity and apparent comfort of the ranch buildings, and the good grazing which extended as far as the eye could reach, and farther. He had seen it all before, but to-day it took on a fresh aspect.

"Anthony knowed what he was about when he hit on this place—I reckon there ain't a better ranch in a hundred mile," he said slowly. "How much stock yu runnin', Reub?"

"Can't tell till round-up," the fat man replied. "Oughta be around four thousand head, I guess."

"An' if it all belongs to Tonia. She's of age, ain't she?"

Reuben Sarel nodded, trying to fathom what the other was driving at.

"It's a big property for a gal to manage," Raven said reflectively.

"She's got me," Sarel pointed out.

"Yeah, an' she had her dad," the saloon-keeper reminded him. "Somethin' might happen to yu too, Reub; we're all mortal."

The stout man's face lost a little of its colour and he took a swallow of whisky rather hastily. He did not like the suggestion, or the tone in which it was made.

"Cheerful chap, ain't you?" he said, with an attempt at jocularly. "Anyways, I s'pose Tonia will be gettin' married sooner or later."

"To Andy Bordene?"

"Looks like, though I dunno as anythin' is fixed."

"An' what happens to yu then, Reub?"

Sarel stared in surprise. "Why, I hadn't give it a thought," he said. "S'pose I'd stay put, or perhaps Andy would let me run the Box B if they decided to live here."

"Don't yu gamble on that," the visitor said quietly. "I happen to know that Andy don't think much o' yore business capacity—heard him say once that yu hadn't savvy enough to sell cold water in hell. Young blood, yu know, is apt to have ideas of its own an' ain't very patient with age. I'm bettin' yu get yore time."

The statement was made with conviction, and, moreover, though he had denied it, confirmed a fear that had already assailed Tonia's relation more than once. Raven's crafty eyes read all this, saw that the man was shaken to the core, and sneered inwardly.

"Tonia wouldn't turn me out," Reuben protested.

"Mebbe not, but her husband might, an' I figure she'll be a dutiful wife," Raven replied, and struck again, "I'm hopin' not, seein' yu still owe me four thousand."

"It ain't so much, Seth; yu had fifty cows."

"Which I gave yu twenty a head for—good price too for stolen stock," the saloon-keeper retorted, sneering when the other winced. "It was five thou., warn't it? More than I can afford to drop, Reub. If yu lose out here I'll have to go to Tonia."

The threat of exposure to the child he had robbed, but of whom he was genuinely fond, wilted the man. When he spoke it was in a husky whisper:

"Anythin' but that, Seth. Take some more cows; I can manage so they won't be missed."

Raven shook his head. "Too risky—for me. Think I wanta be pulled for rustlin'? I on'y took 'em before 'cause I was damn short an' to oblige yu. No, there's a better way."

Sarel raised his head, a gleam of hope in his deep-sunk eyes.

"S'pose she married someone else?" Raven went on.

"Yu got anybody in yore mind?" Reuben queried.

The saloon-keeper hesitated, and then, "Yeah," he said firmly. "A fella who wouldn't send yu travellin' an' who might forget about that four thousand."

It took a moment or two for the significance of this to sink in, but when it did the fat man sat up in his chair as though he had been stung.

"Yu?" he cried. "Yu marry 'Tonia? Why, damn—" He clamped his lips suddenly.

"Yu were goin' to say—" Raven suggested softly.

Sarel swallowed hard and looked uncomfortable. "I was goin' to say, damn me if I ever thought of it," he lied.

The man who had made the proposition smiled acidly; he knew better. But he was enjoying himself; to get a white man in his power, ride and rake him with the spurs, afforded his mean mind the keenest satisfaction. But having indulged this desire he must apply the soothing ointment; he did not wish to drive his victim to desperation.

"Why should yu 'a' thought of it, Reub?" he asked, smiling. "An' again, why shouldn't yu? I'm young yet, an' there's less important fellas than me in these parts. Is there any reason why I mustn't aspire to yore niece?"

The cold, beady eyes of the speaker bored into those of the man opposite, daring him to say what he knew was in his mind—that there was a reason, one no amount of argument could ever remove. Reuben Sarel squirmed in his chair, fearful of giving offence, as helpless as a hog-tied calf in the branding corral. When the words came they were no answer to the question.

"I expect she ain't never thought o' yu thataway, Seth. It's her say-so, yu know."

"Shore, but yu bein' her on'y relation, I reckoned it right to get yore—consent. No doubt it'll take time, but with yu on my side I got a chance."

To cover his perturbation, Sarel slopped some more whisky in his glass and took a long drink. "Tonia's fond o' Bordene," he said.

"Natural enough—they've been brought up together," Raven agreed. "But Andy's affairs are in bad shape, an' he's drinkin' an' gamblin' more'n a young fella should who's expectin' to settle down. Yu sabe?"

The Double S man nodded miserably; he was getting orders and hated it, but he could not help himself. At his invitation the visitor stayed for the midday meal, and made a surprising effort to be pleasant. He paid Tonia one or two little compliments, but was careful not to let any hint of his intentions escape him. When Bordene's name was mentioned, all he said was, "Andy's havin' a tough time; I'm hopin' he'll make the grade."

After he had gone, the girl turned to her uncle. "I don't think I ever disliked anyone as I do that man," she said.

"He's—slimy."

"Oh, Seth's all right," Reuben muttered, and cursed the passion for poker which had put him in the saloon-keeper's power. He watched as she went to get her pony from the corral, stepping with a fine, swinging grace which, as so many things in her did, brought back her father. The thought that followed made him sick. How would Anthony

have received the proposal to which he had tamely listened? He knew only too well—flung the maker of it headlong into the dust, at no matter what cost to himself. Anthony had been all a man, while he—With a bitter oath he turned into the house.

At the slow "Spanish trot" of the cowpuncher, Raven was returning to Lawless. He was well satisfied with the morning's work. Another instrument for the furtherance of his schemes had been created, a weak one, certainly, but—as he reflected grimly—all the more useful on that account.

Before his brooding eyes flashed a picture of the future as he had planned it: Seth Raven, offspring of a drunken prospector and his Comanche woman, owner of the three big ranches and husband of the prettiest girl in the south-west, rich, respected, and, above all, feared. He saw himself sent to Congress, even appointed Governor of the Territory, and at the thought of that he laughed harshly.

"By God! I'll make some o' these damn Yanks step around," he cried.

It was typical of the man that he did not long indulge in these day-dreams. Almost immediately his mind was again milling over the problems he had to solve, and of these the most pressing was the marshal. Leeson had failed, and he cursed him for a clumsy fool. Then his scowl changed to a Satanic smile of satisfaction; he had hit on a plan, one which would achieve his object without any come-back, which was what he desired.

"That'll fix him," he exulted, and awoke his dozing pony by ripping it across the ribs with both spurs.

CHAPTER XV

It was two mornings later that Pete, who for once was first astir, found a somewhat grubby envelope thrust under the door. It was addressed to "The Marshul."

"Huh, one has come at last," he said. "I'm wonderin' which o' the damsels in this dog-hole of a town has fallen for yore fatal beauty?"

"Usin' yore intellects on an empty stomach'll put yu in a loco-house," the marshal told him.

He tore open the envelope, extracted a scrap of coarse paper, and read:

"Marshul.

If yu wanta here about Sudden, come to the Old Mine at nune.

A Frend."

"Writin' is pretty near good, but she's got her own notions o' spellin'," Pete commented.

"Yu supposin' it's a girl?"

"Shore am. One o' them female wimmen wants to meet yu on the quiet. Mebbe she's bashful, or got a husban', or somethin'."

"You ain't got brains enough to outfit a flea," the marshal said caustically. "Grab a skillet an' get breakfast, yu chunk o' grease."

The approach of noon found Green nearing the rendezvous. He recognized that he was taking a risk, and had no intention of riding blindly into an ambush. Therefore he turned off the trail and advanced cautiously under cover of the chaparral until he was able to see the open space where Bordene's body had been found. Squatting on the ground in the shade of a juniper was a man, smoking a cigarette, and from time to time casting an eye down the trail in the direction of Lawless. He was a Mexican of the poorest class, a peon, raggedly clad, with a knife and pistol thrust through the dirty scarf wound round his waist. For a while the marshal waited, and then rode out.

Instantly the man got up, a gleam in his shifty eyes.

"Buenas dias, señor!" he greeted. "No spik here; I breeng horse."

He slipped like a snake into the brush, and a moment later, a cackle of merriment told the marshal that he was trapped.

"One leetle move, señor, and you die," said a familiar voice.

Green glanced round and saw Moraga covering him with a levelled carbine; saw, too, the dozen bandits with drawn guns closing in upon him from all sides, and realized that any attempt at resistance would be sheer suicide. His hands came away from his guns, and, disregarding the threat, he rolled and lighted a smoke. Then he turned to face the leader.

"Yu win—this time—little man," he said contemptuously. "Brought yore army too, I see."

Moraga spat out a sibilant Spanish oath; like most small men he was touchy about his stature. For an instant his hand hovered over a pistol butt, and then, with a cruel smile, he hissed, "I can wait, señor." Turning to his followers, he added, "Seize and tie him."

The marshal had made his preparations. While his hands had apparently been fumbling with his cigarette papers, he had deftly tied the reins to the horn of his saddle. As soon as he heard the command, he slid to the ground and uttered a shrill call. Nigger knew it for the signal that he was to go full speed, and bunching his great muscles he sprang forward, burst through the ring of astonished riders, and vanished down the trail. Green grinned scornfully as two of the guerrillas spurred after the runaway; he knew his horse. The return of the animal to town with the reins tied would tell Pete something was wrong, and they might be able to trail the bandits; it was his only chance. "Yu don't get the hoss," he said to Moraga. "He's too good for a Greaser."

The Mexican's face flamed at the epithet, but he said nothing. Two men removed the marshal's guns and directed him to mount a pony; his wrists were then secured and his ankles roped beneath the animal's belly. At a word from its leader, the party set out at a fast lope, headed for Mexico, one man remaining behind. They had covered several miles when two horses, one bearing a double burden, caught them up; Nigger had evidently got away.

The satisfaction the marshal derived from this did not make him unduly optimistic. The chance of deliverance was slim indeed, and he had little hope of seeing another day dawn. Some time must necessarily elapse before a rescue party could be organized, and the country on either side of the line was of the wildest description, making the following of a trail a slow and arduous affair. Still, it was not in the man's nature to despair, and he rode along with an air of sardonic indifference. This attitude palpably amazed his captors; in his predicament they would have been shivering with dread, for they knew that El Diablo was not so named without reason.

They crossed Lazy Creek at a point lower than the marshal had done and then plunged into a mass of low, flat-topped hills, through which they made their way by threading long narrow ravines, twisting and turning snake-like about the bases of the mesas.

On the far side of the hills they found a desert confronting them, stretching out in every direction save that from which they had come. Across this arid waste Moraga unhesitatingly led his men. The only break in the maddening monotony of sand was provided by what appeared to be a group of tiny black mounds, towards which they were heading.

Plodding on, the horses' feet sinking to the fetlocks in the hot, powdery sand, they at length reached the spot, and the leader called a halt. It was a curious place. The "mounds" resolved themselves into pieces of stone, set in a rude circle, some upright, pointing like fingers to the sky, others lying prone. Old, weather-scarred, they yet seemed to suggest humanity. The marshal had no thought for them; his mind was busy with the problem of why the stop had been made. It could not be to camp, for there was neither wood nor water; it must be that this was where he was to die. He looked at Moraga, as two of the men removed the rope from his feet and dragged him from the saddle, and saw that he had guessed correctly; the guerrilla leader's face was that of a devil. When he spoke his voice was soft, silky, but charged with menace:

"The señor understands? He will remain here, where nothing can live—long. It is the fate of those who cross El Diablo."

"Shucks! I didn't cross yu; it was the Injun did that," Green retorted. "How them scars healin' up?"

The reminder of his humiliation—one that nothing could ever wipe out—shattered the Mexican's self-control. The unmoved demeanour of the man before him brought on another short spate of rage. "You Gringo dog!" he stormed. "You shall die by inches, slowly, horribly, with life a few paces away and yet out of reach." Again his voice dropped into a low, hateful purr, and the marshal was reminded of a cat playing with a mouse: "The señor has seen a man die of thirst—yes? He know how the tongue go black and swell up teel it too beeg for the mouth; how the body burn like—"

"Them scars on yore chest," the marshal suggested.

This time the gibe produced no outward effect. Moraga went on: "Like fire; the eyes lose their light; and the brain—melts. It is not nice, señor, as you weel learn—presently."

"Yu got me plumb scared," the prisoner replied, and if he was telling the truth his bearing did not show it.

At an order from the leader, Green's wrists were first freed and re-tied with a lariat, which was then fastened securely to one of the smaller horizontal stones. He was too near to the weight to turn round, but he could sit down, and did so, watching the rest of the preparations with a face of iron. Moraga, dismounting, inspected the bonds, and then stepped back a few paces to gloatingly survey his victim.

"I might wheep you, señor," he said, "but I want that you have all your strengt'; you weel suffer longer."

With a harsh laugh he turned away, and as he did so a knife slipped from his sash and dropped soundlessly upon the soft sand. To the marshal's surprise no one appeared to have noticed it. Moraga croaked another command, and one of the men unslung his gourd canteen and placed it in the shadow of a stone about ten paces from the bound man, who caught the swish of water as he put it down. The guerrilla leader waved to it.

"There is life, señor, if you can reach it," he jeered. "But the stone is a leetle heavy, I fear. Adios!"

With a snarling grin, he bowed to the man he was condemning to a cruel death, and leaping on the back of his

horse, signed to his troop and followed them on the journey out of the desert. The marshal watched the riders vanish over a distant swell and then gazed around; he could see nothing but sand, ridges, humps, and flat levels, reaching unendingly to the horizon. His position appeared to be desperate; even if he got free, the task of making his way on foot out of this grim wilderness would be well-nigh hopeless.

The stillness of the desert wrapped him like a shroud. The sun, a ball of white flame, blazed out of a cloudless dome of pale blue. There was no movement in the air, no bird, reptile, or insect. Nature seemed to have called a halt in this desolate spot. With the departure of his captors, their low guttural voices and jingle of accoutrements, sound seemed to have gone also, leaving a silence which was that of a tomb. An instinctive desire to break this menacing, nerve-shattering quiet made him speak aloud:

"Wonder what kind o' hombres fetched these rocks? Sorta temple, looks like: been here a few thousand years too, I reckon. This fella I'm roped to might be an Aztec stone o' sacrifice. Well, it'll shore have another offering if I don't get busy."

The sound of his own voice amazed him: he hardly recognized it. He found a difficulty in forming the words; his throat was parched and his tongue already swollen. The scorching rays of the sun had sucked every atom of moisture from his body, and the desire to drink was becoming unbearable. Anxiously he peered through the dancing, quivering heat, but the surrounding desert was empty.

"Damnation! I'll beat the game yet," he said, and the fact that the words were a whisper only warned him that he had no time to lose.

Twisting his fingers round the lariat, he dug his heels into the sand and flung his weight forward. There seemed to be a slight movement, but whether it was the stone or a mere stretching of the rawhide he could not determine. Again he tried, and this time felt sure that the weight behind him rocked. It gave him an idea. Turning as far as he could, with the toe of his boot he scraped the sand from under the stone, forming a hollow for it to fall into. This helped, but it was slow work, and at the end of an hour's digging and pulling he had advanced little more than a yard.

Panting for breath in that oven-like atmosphere, with every muscle aching and a throat which seemed to be on fire, he sat on the stone and gazed at the blade which meant freedom gleaming in the sunlight only a few feet away.

"It ain't possible, but I'm a-goin' to do it," he tried to say, but the sounds which issued from his tortured, puffed lips were unintelligible.

Doggedly he resumed his labours, a slight slope in the sand helping a little, but the terrific exertion, the hammering heat, and lack of liquid were taking their toll, and the next hour found his strength almost spent, with the goal still two yards distant. Grey with dust, speechless, staggering weakly, he fought on, creeping inch by inch towards the coveted bit of steel. His body was one huge throb of pain, but he battled with it, tensing his teeth and tugging until it seemed to him that his arms must leave their sockets.

He was still some five feet from the knife when he again sank gasping upon the stone, unable to move the monstrous burden another inch. It seemed to be the end; even the magnificent muscles and amazing vitality with which clean living and the great open spaces had endowed the puncher failed at a task which would have killed an ox. Glaring with haggard eyes, a sudden possibility occurred to him; it was his last hope. Resting all his weight on his hands, he arched his body and reached for the knife with one heel. The strain on his pulsing sinews was agonizing, but after one or two attempts he hooked his spur over the glittering blade and brought it nearer. Pausing for long moments between each effort, he at last had the thing at his feet, but tied as he was, could not get his hands to it. Kneeling in the sand, he contrived to grip the haft between his knees and stand up again; then his groping fingers touched the blade, and a moment later he was free. Staggering like a drunken man he lunged forward and snatched up the canteen, only to fling it down; it was empty!

A croak of mingled disappointment, rage, and despair broke from his strangled throat as the devilish cruelty of the trick seeped into his tortured brain. The knife left apparently by accident; the canteen of water, deliberately punctured when the man set it down, to deal a crushing blow to the reason of one already dying from thirst and the exhaustion of a punishing fight for freedom. And, in truth, the marshal was near to madness. Dimly he remembered stories of the ghastly tortures by the Holy Inquisition in the old days, and a grim thought saved his reason: Moraga had proved his boast that he was of Old Spain.

Instinctively he glanced round, almost expecting to hear mocking laughter, but there was no living thing in sight. The Mexican and his men had not waited—there was no need to put themselves to that discomfort. Even if the prisoner succeeded in getting free and retained his sanity, he would not have the strength to escape from the desert without water, food, and a horse.

Faint and wracked with pain, the American was not yet beaten. Picking up the knife, which he had dropped directly he had cut himself loose, he turned his face to the north. The sun's rays were no longer vertical, but the heat was still terrific. Nightfall would bring a bitter cold air, and though this would mean some relief, he knew that unless he

found water he must die. Lurching from side to side he floundered on through the burning sand. Then his glazed, bloodshot eyes rested on a welcome sight, a grassy glade, trees waving in the breeze, and, leaping down from the rock-side into a little pool, a silver streak of crystal-clear water. So real did it seem that he fancied he could hear the gurgle and splash of the tiny cascade.

The marshal knew it was not real, that it was only a desert mirage, another trick—perpetrated by Nature, this time—to steal the last vestige of his sanity. He set his jaw savagely, and soon—as he had known it would—the vision vanished, leaving only the old desolation. He staggered on, frequently falling from sheer weakness, but always, after a time, rising to continue the fight. A great stain of crimson on the western horizon told him that the sun was sinking, and the air was already cooler. In the effort to retain his reason, he tried to keep his mind from the one thing his whole body cried out for. It was in vain; pictures of cool running streams into which he plunged insistently presented themselves, and the sound of the waterfall he had seen in the mirage was perpetually in his ears. With leaden feet he stumbled on and fell, a sharp pain stabbing his wrist. In the gathering gloom he saw that he had dropped close to a queer green growth, shaped like a cask, and defended by fierce spikes. It was a bisnaga, or barrel cactus.

Had he been able to utter a sound it would have been one of joy, for this fortunate find might mean life. Raising himself to his knees, he cut off the top of the cactus, and slicing out a portion of the pithy interior crushed it greedily against his swollen lips and tongue. The liquid so obtained was pure and slightly sweet. Repeating the operation until the plant was exhausted, he felt new energy stealing into his veins. Unfortunately, the cactus was a very small one, and though he searched diligently he could not discover another. Reinvigorated in some degree by this relief to his torture he pursued his way. Though there was no wind, it was now intensely cold. The moon came up and threw a softening silver radiance over the harshness of the desert. To the desperately worn man plodding through it, the sand seemed a malignant devil which clutched his ankles and held them. Each step was now an achievement, for his strength was gone. During twelve hours he had drunk less than half a pint of cactus-juice, and this in a land where a man needed two gallons of water per day. Moreover, for a great part of that time he had taxed his body to the uttermost. Weaving blindly onwards he fell again, made a last attempt to rise, and then lay supine...

CHAPTER XVI

The marshal awoke to a pleasant feeling of warmth and found that he was covered with a blanket and lying beside a fire of dead mesquite branches. Pete, with an anxious face, was kneeling over him, a canteen in his hands. Green made a feeble grab at it.

"No, yu don't," the deputy grinned. "That stuff's wuss'n whisky for yu just now, an' a damn sight more precious in this corner o' hell. Yu gotta be spoon-fed, fella, yet awhile."

Though he would have sold his soul for one deep drink, the sufferer submitted, knowing that the other was right. At the end of an hour he could sit up and use his tongue again, but he was still utterly played out. From behind a hummock of sand Black Feather now appeared and flung an armful of twigs on the fire.

"How'd yu find me?" the invalid enquired.

"Yu gotta thank the Injun for that," Pete told him. "Fact is, we didn't do no searchin' for rustled cattle; I played a hunch an' we followed yu 'bout an hour after; when we met yore hoss I knowed somethin' was wrong. We picked up the trail at the Old Mine. How the hell that copper-coloured cuss followed it I dunno, but he did, an' I'm bettin' we come just in time."

"That's whatever," the marshal agreed, and held out his hand to the redskin. "I'm mighty obliged to yu," he added.

Black Feather took the hand timidly. "White man my brother," he said in his low, husky tone. "My fault he here."

"Shucks!" Green said disgustedly. "My own damn stupidity. They played me for a sucker an' won—this time. Black Feather big chief; he trail bird in the air an' fish in river, huh?"

The Indian smiled at this extravagant tribute to his powers.

Water, warmth, and food gradually restored the marshal's strength, but the red rim of the sun was rising above the horizon before he was able to stand. Helped by the others, he mounted the Indian's horse, its owner electing to walk, and they set out. By this time he had managed to tell the full story; on the redskin it produced no visible effect, but the deputy was furious.

"By God!" he said. "If I find the fella that wrote that invite I'll make him curse his mother for bringin' him into the world. Who d'yu reckon it might be?"

"Ain't a notion," the marshal admitted. "Moraga sprung the trap, but I'm figurin' he didn't bait it. He speaks our lingo pretty good, but that don't mean he can write it."

"Leeson?" Barsay suggested.

Green shook his head. "Them mistakes was made a-purpose," he said. "Good writin' an' bad spellin' don't usually go together."

After a short silence, Barsay spoke again: "See here, Jim, I got an idea. I'll get back to town an' not let on yu've been found. Mebbe somebody'll give us a pointer."

"It's certainly a chance," Green allowed. "Yu see, nobody in town oughta know what's become o' me."

So when they had got clear of the desert and over the Border, the marshal and Black Feather struck out for the Box B ranch, and the deputy took the trail for Lawless. The evening found him in the bar of the Red Ace. He had already decided on his plan of action. Remembering his friend's dictum that a man in liquor may learn more than a sober one, he had resolved to try it out. Draping himself against the bar, he swallowed several drinks in rapid succession and then turned a scowling face on the company.

"Lo, Pete, how they treatin' yu?" asked the store-keeper jovially.

"Mighty seldom—yu'll never have a better chanct," the deputy told him.

Loder laughed and ordered liquor. "What's come o' the marshal—ain't seen him all day?" he went on.

In a voice that could be heard all over the room Barsay related his own version of the mysterious missive, adding that, becoming uneasy, he had followed the marshal to the appointed spot only to discover the ample evidence of an ambush. The story gained him the attention of most present. Suddenly he darted a finger at Leeson.

"Ask that fella," he said. "Mebbe he can tell yu somethin'."

He watched the man closely as he spoke and noted the look of blank amazement. "What yu gittin' at?" Leeson protested. "How should I know anythin' of it?"

Pete, in fact, saw that he did not, but he had to justify his charge. "Huh! Yu tried to bump him off two-three days ago," he growled.

"I told yu it was a mistake," the 88 man explained quickly, for the statement produced a murmur from several.

"Shore was, an' one more o' the same'll be yore last," Pete threatened.

He poured himself another drink, took a mouthful, spat it out and turned wrathfully on the bartender: "Ain't yu never goin' to get some decent liquor?" he asked belligerently. "That stuff would poison a hawg."

"What's the trouble, Jude?" The saloon-keeper's spare, stooping figure injected itself into the group.

"Barsay's on the prod 'bout the nose-dye," the bartender explained.

Raven's sneering gaze swept the deputy. "Too strong for him, seemin'ly," he said.

The deputy cackled. "That's an insult to me an' a compliment to the dope yu call whisky," he said, with a slight stagger. "What I wanna know is what yu done with the marshal?"

The saloon-keeper's face was wooden. "Yo're either drunk or loco," he replied, and appealed to one of the bystanders: "What: the hell's he mean?" He heard the story with apparent indifference, but Pete, lolling against the bar, saw an expression in the narrowed eyes which might have been satisfaction.

"Looks like he's met up with Moraga," he commented. "I warned him the Mexican was bad medicine, but yu can't tell the marshal anythin'. I guess we won't see him no more."

Bar say nodded his head stupidly and fumbled with his glass.

"How'd yu know it was the Mexican?" he queried.

"I don't—I'm guessin'," Raven replied. "Green has twisted his tail two-three times, an' Greasers ain't a forgivin' sort." His lips suddenly split in a feline grin: "Anyways, what yu belly-achin' about? Don't yu want his job?"

Pete blinked at him owlshly. "Hell's bells! I hadn't thought o' that."

So ludicrous was his expression that the onlookers laughed aloud, and Raven was quick to seize the opportunity.

"Set 'em up, Jude," he cried. "We'll drink to the marshal."

"The new one?" someone questioned.

"There ain't a new one—yet," Raven told him, and lifting his glass added, "The marshal."

Pete grinned foolishly as he raised his glass with the rest, and said thickly, "Here's hopin'"—he paused a second and a man guffawed—"he comes back."

"O' course, we're all wishin' that," the saloon-keeper agreed, and smiled understandingly at the deputy.

The smile confirmed the little man's suspicions, and sent him back to his quarters in an unusually thoughtful frame of mind.

* * *

The marshal received an enthusiastic welcome at the Box B; in the eyes of its owner nothing was too good for the man who had rescued Tonia and punished her assailant. He had heard the details from the girl's own lips, and only her urgent entreaties had kept him from rounding up his outfit and going in search of the offender. He listened with amazement and growing anger to the marshal's account of Moraga's attempted vengeance.

"That Greaser's gettin' too brash whatever," he said. "'Bout time he was abolished. Yu got that paper with yu? Mebbe I know the writin'."

When the marshal produced it the young man stared in puzzled bewilderment.

"If it didn't seem ridic'ulous I'd have said Potter wrote that," he pronounced. "But he wouldn't be agin yu or for the Greaser."

"It ain't Raven's fist, I s'pose, or Leeson's?"

"Dunno 'bout Leeson—shouldn't think he could write so good, but it certainly ain't Raven. What's put them in yore mind?"

The marshal told of the 88 rider's attempt to bushwhack him, and the rancher's eyes widened.

"Yu think Seth put him up to it?"

"I dunno, Andy, an' that's a fact. I'm gropin' in the dark. Leeson is one o' Raven's men, an' unless he's been told different, he'd figure me the same, seein' that Raven made me marshal."

Both were silent for a few moments, and then Green said, "Don't think I'm hornin' in, Andy, but did yore dad owe Raven money?"

"Fifteen thousand, though I didn't know of it till I saw the note," Bordene replied. "I paid it off. Why?"

"When he drew out that five thousand the mornin' he was—got, he told Potter it was to square a debt, an' he went to the Red Ace," the marshal said quietly. "Raven was out—at the 88. Yu have the note?"

He studied the cancelled document carefully. "That figure one could 'a' been put in after it was wrote," he pointed out.

"Shore could," Andy agreed. "I reckon the Old Man was some careless, but yu got Seth sized up wrong, marshal; he wouldn't play it that low on me."

Green laughed. "Well, seein' as yu've paid, I s'pose it don't do no good to worry about it," he said. "Aimin' to try another drive?"

"Yeah, an' it's goin' through this time, yu bet vu," Bordene said.

"Don't camp too near Shiverin' Sand," Green warned.

"Seth was tellin' me the same thing yestiddy," Andy smiled. "I said I hadn't made no plans."

"Let it be known yu expect to bed down in The Pocket again, an' then change yore mind," the marshal advised.

"Yo're a suspicious jigger, but it ain't a bad notion," the other agreed.

* * *

When his guests had departed on the following morning, Andy set out for the Double S to take Tonia riding. He soon noticed that Reuben Sarel was not his jovial self, and that there was a tiny crease between the girl's level eyebrows.

"What's troublin' Uncle this bright mornin'?" he asked as they trotted away. "Not losin' weight, is he?"

"Losing cows, Andy," she told him, "and we don't know how. I think, too, he's worrying about that Mexican."

The young man snorted. "That fella's becomin' a menace to the country," he said, and told of the guerrilla's latest exploit.

The girl shivered; she knew what the victim of it must have endured. "Are the men around here going to stand for that?" she asked indignantly.

"They ain't," Andy assured her. "When I get my drive through something goin' to be done; but, for now, the marshal wants it kept quiet."

"I shall be glad when you are back, Andy," the girl said. "I'm a bit scared, I think."

"Of that dirty Greaser?" he asked.

"No—not altogether," she said slowly. "I can't explain it, but I've had a 'breakers ahead' sort of feeling, and that man Raven has begun visiting the Double S."

Bordene laughed. "Nothin' to that, Tonia," he replied. "I s'pose he had business with Reuben."

"That's the excuse, of course, but if it weren't so absurd I'd say he came to see me," Tonia told him. "Yesterday he brought me a box of candy, and—he pays me compliments."

Andy's eyebrows rose. "Yu think he's courtin' yu?" he gasped incredulously. "Why, he's a breed. Ain't Reuben showed him the door?"

"He sings praises; I think he's afraid of him in some way," Tonia replied.

"My Gawd!" the young man exploded. "Seth Raven shinin' up to yu—a Sarel? Well, if that ain't the frozen limit." He looked at her closely. "Yu still don't like the fella, Tonia?"

"I detest him," was her emphatic reply. "To me he always suggests what they call him, 'The Vulture,' rapacious, cruel, a bird of prey."

For some time the rancher rode in moody silence; he was getting a new angle on the man he had hitherto regarded as a good sort. The seeds of doubt sown in his mind by the marshal were beginning to germinate, fed by this latest factor. Had the note been tampered with? Was the breaking up of his drive herd the word of the 88? He recalled the poker game, in which he had a shrewd suspicion that Green had saved him from being skinned—for he now knew

that Pardoe was a not too scrupulous professional gambler. Were these all part of a plan to put a rival out of the running? The questions milled in his mind and he could find no satisfactory answers. It was the girl who spoke first:

"Too bad to bother you with my little troubles, Andy. Especially when you have bigger ones of your own."

"Shucks! I hope yu'll allus come to me, Tonia, Yu know I'd do anythin'."

There was an undercurrent of feeling in the voice and the girl steered from the subject. "You drive to-morrow?" she asked.

"Yeah. I've got a good bunch—all hand-picked—an' if I lose 'em this time I'll be comin' to yu for a job, Tonia."

For an instant she looked at him in startled surprise, but his grin reassured her, and she replied in the same vein:

"What sort of job would you like, Andy? But there, you'll make it this trip; bad luck, like lightning, never strikes twice in the same place."

The soft, sweet voice and the heartening warm smile in her eyes were almost irresistible; he ached to take her in his arms and tell her that the job he wanted was to care for and shield her all the days of his life. But his man's pride kept him silent. When he came back, his ranch cleared of debt—

So the golden moment passed.

CHAPTER XVII

The marshal's return to Lawless excited a great deal of curiosity which had to remain unsatisfied. His own explanation was that he had been absent on business connected with his office, and he treated any suggestion that he had been kidnapped by El Diablo with a tolerant smile, an attitude which aroused Pete's personal wrath.

"What's the grand idea?" he enquired. "Here's me workin' up a case agin the Greaser an' yu percolate in an' knock it flat. Makes me look a fool."

"I can't see that yore appearance has altered the littlest bit," the marshal told him, with that disarming grin of his.

"We gotta walk in the water, ol'-timer; yu watch Raven's face when I say my little piece."

They had not long to wait, for the saloon-keeper came in soon afterwards.

"Lo, marshal, so yo're back again all safe an' sound," he began, with a crooked smile. "We've shore bin some worried 'bout yu. Barsay here, reckoned yu'd bin carried off by Moraga."

"Hold yore hosses, Raven, it sticks in my mind that suggestion come from yu," the deputy protested.

"That so? Well, mebbe yo're right," Raven admitted easily. "Yore high-falutin' yarn made it seem likely."

"Pete's a born romancer," the marshal said. "Hear him tell of his past an' yu look for his wings."

"So it warn't the Greaser?" Raven asked.

"Señor Moraga has not yet settled his little account with me," Green smiled, adding, "I've been at the Box B."

This was not all the truth, but it served, for the marshal saw the visitor's eyes widen. All he said, however, was:

"Andy's drivin' to-day, I hear. Where's he campin' this time?"

"Same place as before, I understand. It's a good beddin' ground an' he reckons there ain't no storms around."

Raven nodded. "Weather seems likely to stay put," he agreed.

When he had gone Pete turned aggressively on his chief. "Why d'yu tell him where Andy was campin'?" he asked.

"I didn't," the marshal grinned.

"But—" the deputy began, and then comprehension came to him and he grinned too.

"Awright, Solomon," the little man said. "What yu goin' to do now?"

"Put some money in the bank," Green told him.

Barsay dropped into the nearest chair. "Savin' coin, the hawg, an' me with a thirst," he ejaculated in mock horror.

"Wonder which of us he can't trust, me or the Injun?"

To which query he got no reply, the marshal being already on the way to execute his financial errand. Arrived outside the bank he hung about until he saw the clerk emerge and then entered. As he had hoped, Potter was alone. He took the money Green tendered and wrote out a receipt.

"Ain't got on the track of that outlaw yet, I suppose?" he remarked, and when his customer admitted that his supposition was correct, he added, "I was saying to Raven yesterday that you hadn't much to go on, and that probably he's hundreds of miles away by now."

"Raven is a hard man to satisfy," the marshal stated.

"You are right," the banker agreed harshly. "He's—" he paused suddenly, and then, in an altered tone, went on, "a good customer, and I ought not to be discussing him, but I know you won't chatter, marshal."

Having assured him on that point, Green came away, wondering. A comparison of the receipt with the mysterious note showed a similarity in the writing; they might have been done by the same person, but why, Green asked

himself, should the banker help Moraga? For the rest, all he had discovered was that Potter disliked but feared Raven, an attitude common to many of the citizens of Lawless. Additional proof of this was afforded that same evening. The marshal was nearing the bank when he heard Seth's voice, and, curious as to his business there so late, slipped round the corner of the building and waited. In a moment the door opened and he heard the banker say, in a tone of abject humility:

"I'll do as you wish, sir."

"Yu'd better," the saloon-keeper said contemptuously, and went up the street.

From his door the banker watched until the other was out of hearing and then his pent-up bitterness burst its bonds:

"And may God damn your rotten soul," he hissed, and shook his fist at the retreating figure.

Not until the door slammed did the marshal resume his way. One thing the incident told him—Potter was in The Vulture's power, and might therefore have been compelled to write the decoy message.

"Odd number that," he ruminated. "The banker is a bet I mustn't overlook."

* * *

A week slid by and the marshal was no nearer the solution of the problem he had set himself to solve. Though there had been no further activity on the part of Sudden the Second, Green did not agree with Potter's suggestion that the outlaw had departed for fresh pastures; the black horse was still in its hiding-place. In the meanwhile, he had plenty to occupy his mind. Two attempts had been made on his life, and though he believed that the saloon-keeper had something to do with them, he had no proof. Since his escape from death in the desert, the autocrat of Lawless had treated him with jovial friendliness, a circumstance which aroused suspicion in the object of it. So marked indeed was the change that Pete was moved to caustic comment.

"If yu was a turkey I'd say he was fattenin' yu up for the killin'," the deputy said. "Looks like Andy has made it this time."

The marshal nodded. "Jevons was at the Red Ace last night," he said. "An' his boss didn't seem none pleased 'bout somethin'."

Green's guess was a good one. The 88 foreman had come on an unpleasant errand—the admission of his own failure, and that this was due to wrong information supplied by his employer, though it would have excused him with most men, did not do so with Raven.

"Well, how many d'yu get?" was his opening question, as the foreman entered the private room.

"Not a hoof," Jevons replied. "Whoever told yu they aimed to bed down in The Pocket got it wrong."

The half-breed gritted out an oath as he remembered where he got the information. Always, by accident or design,, the marshal hampered him.

"Green again, blast him," he muttered. "He's allus in the way."

"Put him outa business," the foreman suggested callously.

"Tell me how," snapped the other. "Yu can't—he's got yu all buffaloeed."

Jevons was silent for a while, and when he did speak his remark seemed to be irrelevant: "'Split' Adam is at the 88," he said.

Raven reflected. "Think he'd tackle it?" he asked.

"'Split' is mighty near sellin' his saddle," Jevons told him. "Five hundred dollars would listen good to him about now."

Since a saddle is the last thing a Western rider parts with the saloon-keeper knew that Adam must be at desperation point.

"Send him in," he said shortly.

Hard-looking strangers attracted little attention in Lawless, unless they invited it by their actions, and this Mister Adam was careful to avoid. In fact, he arrived after dark, pushed his bronc furtively into the Red Ace corral, himself into that place of entertainment by the side door, and so into the owner's private sanctum. Raven nodded towards a chair, shoved forward a box of cigars, and silently studied his visitor. Adam had small pretensions to beauty. On the wrong side of forty, he was thin—even weedy—in build. He had a long, narrow face, emphasized by a ginger goatee beard and a stringy, drooping moustache, and a sneer appeared to be his natural expression. His small eyes, cold, expressionless, were like polished stone. Two guns, the holsters tied down, hung low on his hips. He endured the other man's scrutiny for a moment or two, and then, in a harsh, rasping voice, he said:

"Jevons allowed vu wanted to see me. Well, yu done it, an' if that's all I'll be on my way."

The truculent, bullying tone did not appear to affect Raven. "How many men have yu killed, Mister Adam?" he asked. "There's a fella in this town we could git along without, but he won't take a hint."

The sneering question was plain in the other's eyes.

"Yeah. Natural for yu to think that, Mister Adam," Raven went on, "but I'm not a gun-fighter—don't even tote one. My weapons are brains and—dollars."

The killer smiled wolfishly. "How many—dollars?" he asked.

"Five hundred," Raven replied. "The fella happens to be the marshal too, so if he—left us—there'd be a vacancy."

"I'll go yu," Adam said. "I can use that mazuma, an' I've allus thought a star would look about right on me."

"Yu gotta earn 'em first," the other warned. "The chap ain't no pilgrim, an' yu'll need to play yore cards close. He calls hisself Green, but yu can risk a stack it don't describe him."

"I ain't exactly a beginner my own self," the gunman replied. "Nothin' will happen to-night—don't want it to look like I come in a-purpose—but I'll be takin' his measure. O' course, yu won't know me from—Adam."

He laughed hoarsely at his little joke, nodded to his host, and departed, again using the side door. Some time later he oozed into the Red Ace, posted himself at the bar, and called for the customary drink. Beyond a casual glance, no one took any notice of him, but his own eyes were busy. Presently Pete drifted in, and when he caught sight of the deputy's badge, Adam looked at Raven, who was playing cards at a nearby table. The saloon-keeper shook his head slightly.

When Green eventually made his appearance, Adam got from Raven the sign he was waiting for, and his cold gaze watched the marshal incessantly. He noted the tall, limber frame, the easy play of the muscles when their owner moved, and the youthfulness. But the little smile which crinkled the corners of the firm mouth and softened the square jaw misled him.

"Kinda young for his job an' liable to take chances," he reflected sneeringly. He turned to the bartender. "Ever heard o' Split Adam?" he asked loudly.

"Yeah, but I never seen him," Jude replied.

"Yu have now," came the answer. "Yessir, I'm that eedential fella. Know how I got that label?"

The barkeep did not, and shook his head.

"'Cause I c'n split a bullet on a knife edge at twelve paces," boasted the killer, and with an aggressive look at Green. "That's shootin', Mister Marshal."

"Shore is," the officer agreed mildly. "But if the knife-edge was bustlin' bullets in yore direction at the time it might make a difference."

"There's quite a few who found it didn't," Adam sneered.

"I'll have to take yore word for that, seh," the marshal replied. "I reckon theirs ain't available."

He turned away, ending the discussion, and the gunman's gaze followed him with malignant triumph. He did not want to clash yet; he was merely trying out his man. The marshal left the saloon early, and when Pete followed some time later he found him cleaning and oiling his revolvers.

"Know anythin' 'bout that hombre Adam?" asked the deputy casually.

"Heard of him," Green replied. "He's bad, all right—one o' the gunmen yu can hire. There's towns in Texas where they'd jerk him on the way to Paradise with considerable enthusiasm."

"He's after yu," Pete said.

The marshal grinned. "Ain't yu the cute little observer," he bantered, and then, "Yeah, I sort suspicioned it m'self, an' I'm wonderin'—who's payin'?"

"Well, seein' he's a buzzard I'd say it was a case of 'birds of a feather,' " the deputy opined. "I'm a-goin' to be yore shadder tomorrow."

To this decision he adhered; wherever the marshal went Pete was, unobtrusively, close at hand. It was about noon when the pair of them entered the Red Ace. Adam was there, talking and drinking with several of the toughest inhabitants. Raven was leaning against the far end of the bar, and the attendance was bigger than usual.

Immediately the marshal entered all eyes turned upon him, and he guessed that the killer had been talking. With an evil look that advertised his intention to force a quarrel, Adam stepped towards his quarry.

"Marshal, yu ain't lookin' too good—kinda peaky 'bout the gills," he began. "I reckon this part o' the country don't suit yu."

The grating tones carried a plain threat, and the room waited in utter silence for the officer's reply to the challenge.

The marshal sipped the drink he had ordered, noting grimly that men in his vicinity were edging away from him.

Putting down his glass, he commenced to roll a cigarette.

"Yu think I'd better be goin'?" he asked in mild surprise.

"Don't be funny with me, fella," he warned. "I let yu git away with it las' night, but that don't happen twice.

Savvy?"

Hands hanging over his gun-butts, teeth bared like a snarling dog's, he thrust his face within a few inches of his intended victim's, his narrowed eyes flaming with the lust to kill. The marshal straightened up and stepped back a pace, throwing his weight on his right foot.

"Mister Adam," he said quietly. "I don't like rubbin' noses with a rattlesnake. That face o' yores may look mighty near human two miles off, but at two inches it's an outrage. I'm movin' it."

With the words his right fist came up, and as the arm shot out, landed with terrific force on the out-thrust jaw of the killer. Driven home with all the power of perfect muscles, backed up by the forward fling of the body, the blow lifted the fellow from his feet and hurled him full length on the floor. He was still conscious, for Green's fist had just missed the point of the jaw, but he could not rise. Lying there, glaring his hatred, he poured out a stream of abuse, and clawed feebly for his gun. "I guess I wouldn't," the marshal warned, his hand on his own weapon.

"Fade."

The ruffian scrambled to his feet, a fury of passion shaking him.

Staggering blindly like a drunken man, Adam went out, and the victor turned to face the advice and expostulations of his friends.

"Yu did oughta drilled him, marshal," Durley put in. "He shore asked for it."

"Oh, I reckon he'll drift," Green said.

"Drift nothin'—he'll hang around an' shoot yu from cover," Loder contributed. "Better leave here by the back door." The marshal shook his head. He had noticed Raven's departure immediately after the killer's downfall, and was wondering whether his expression denoted contempt or disappointed anger. When the excitement had died down a little several of the spectators left the saloon, and one of them thrust the door open again to say there was no sign of Adam.

"Two-three of us'll come out with yu," Pete suggested. "No, I'll play her a lone hand," the marshal said firmly. Bunched together, the men went out into the sunshine, but halted a little way along the street. Evidently the news had spread, for there were other groups and heads protruded from windows and doors. Three tense minutes loitered past, and then the swing-door of the saloon was thrown back and the marshal stepped out. At the same instant a gun roared from the corner of a log building opposite and the onlookers saw Green pitch sideways, to lie prone on the footpath, his right arm outflung and his left bent across his hip. With a cackle of malignant triumph, Adam emerged from his shelter, both guns poised.

"Well, gents, I reckon I've sent yore marshal to hell. Any o' yu got notions?"

Muttered curses were the only response to his bravado. Pete, filled with a bitter rage, looked at the prostrate form of his friend and wondered if his eyes were playing tricks. Surely that left hand was moving, nearer and nearer to the holster. A moment later he knew, for the gun was out and spouting flame. The amazed spectators saw the killer crumple up and collapse in the dust, and by the time they reached the marshal, he was on his feet again. They found him untouched.

"Shore thought he'd got yu," Durley said. "How'd he come to miss?"

"I fell before he fired," Green explained. "I guessed he'd hide an' lay for me. Had to make him show hisself. Well, he had his chance."

"Why yu give him any has got me guessin'," the deputy grumbled.

Later on, in the privacy of their own shack, Green enlightened him. "Yu see, Pete," he argued. "Yu don't blame a gun for killin', yu blame the fella who pulls the trigger. This Adam jasper was just a gun, an' though I'm holdin' he warn't fit to go on livin', it's the man who used him who oughta be lyin' out there."

"Mebbe yo're right," the deputy conceded. "I'm just .is pleased things worked out as they did. Chewin' over these here fine distinctions'll end one day in yore bein' described as 'the late lamented.'"

CHAPTER XVIII

During the next few days Green, in accordance with his resolution, made discreet enquiries regarding Potter. The result was meagre. Residing in a room at the back of his premises, he had remained an Easterner in speech and habits, taking no part in the activities of the town other than his business demanded. So that it was a surprise to the marshal, sitting alone in his office one evening, when the banker opened the door and slipped quietly in.

"Evening, marshal," he said. "Am I disturbing you?" Green assured him that he was not and invited him to take a seat. He noticed that the visitor selected a position where he could not be seen from the window, and that his hands were trembling.

"Marshal," he began, "I hope you will not be offended, but I've been studying you rather closely since you came here and I've decided that you are to be trusted. Believing that, I am going to depend on you in a matter of the greatest importance to me." He drew out a long, sealed envelope. "I want you to take charge of this, hide it, and give me your word that it shall not be opened until the breath is out of my body. It is of no interest to any save one man, and he would sell his soul to destroy it. Should he learn it is in your possession he would slay you without hesitation, and—the contents of that envelope are my death-warrant also. I felt it only fair to tell you this, marshal, although it may mean refusal."

His voice shook on the last few words, and there was eagerness in his eyes as he awaited the other's decision.

"I ain't refusin', Mr. Potter," Green said. "I'll take yore envelope, an' no one shall see or hear of it again till yu are beyond human hurt. That's what yu want, ain't it?" The banker nodded, a look of relief on his face. The marshal hesitated for a moment and then added, "Yu got any reason to think yu are in danger?"

"I can't tell you another word, marshal," the banker replied, as he rose and held out his hand. "I am deeply obliged to you."

After the visitor had gone Green looked at the envelope, but it was a plain one and told him nothing. That the maker of this strange request was in deadly fear was very evident, but why? With a shrug of his shoulders he set about the task of concealing the envelope. Wrapped in a piece of an old slicker, he buried it beneath his bed, stamping the earth flat again to remove any signs of disturbance.

"If what Potter says is right it'll be like sleepin' over a keg o' giant powder," he reflected grimly. "Well, I reckon that won't ruin my rest anyways."

* * *

Andy Bordene rode into Lawless with a light heart and let out a whoop of delight when he saw the marshal and his deputy talking to Raven just outside the bank. Leaping down, he greeted the officers joyously, but his manner towards the saloonkeeper was more distant.

"Lo, Andy, so yu fetched 'em through this time?" Green said.

"Yu betcha—no trouble a-tall," the young man replied. "An' I sold well too; I got over thirty thousand in my clothes an' I'm a-goin' to talk turkey to Potter an' get my ranch back right now."

"Good for yu," the marshal said. "No time like—hell! here comes a gent in a hurry."

At the eastern end of the street, a buckboard, drawn by two wild-eyed, maddened ponies rocketed into view. The driver, a short and very fat man, was urging his team both with tongue and whip to greater efforts, despite the fact that nearly every jolt of the swaying, lurching vehicle threatened to fling him into the rutty road. Andy needed only one look.

"I'm an Injun if it ain't Reub Sarel," he explained. "What's broke loose now?"

With a string of expletives which would have aroused the envy of even a talented mule-skinner the driver of the buck-board flung his weight on the lines and dragged the ponies to a standstill by main force. His appearance bore testimony to the urgency of his errand. Coatless, hatless, shirt torn open at the throat, his fleshy face grimed with dust and sweat, he was hardly to be recognized as the indolent manager of the Double S. Flinging down reins and whip, he fell rather than stepped out of the conveyance, gulped once, and then said huskily:

"Marshal, they got Tonia. She went for a ride yestiddy an' didn't come home. I sent the boys out to comb the country, an' this mornin' early they found her hoss—shot. There warn't no sign of her. I left the boys searchin' an' come for help. I'm guessin' that damned Greaser has nabbed her."

"By God! if Moraga has dared to lay a finger on her I'll tear him in strips," Andy swore. "Guns an' hosses, marshal; we'll get that coyote if we have to foller him clear across Mexico."

Green was watching Raven. At the first mention of the Mexican the man's sallow face had gone paler and his little black eyes had gleamed with sudden anger. Now he turned to the officer and spoke, his voice charged with venom: "If it's Moraga, get him, marshal," he rasped. "Spare no effort or expense. I'd come with yu, but I'm no good with a gun, I'd only be a hindrance. Kill the dirty cur. Bring the girl back an' yu can name yore own reward. Sabe?"

There was no mistaking his sincerity. For some reason which the marshal could not fathom the disappearance of Tonia had stirred unsuspected depths in the saloon-keeper.

"We'll find her," Green said, and turned to Bordene. "Better hurry up yore business with Potter."

"That must wait," the rancher replied. "I'll leave the coin with him an' settle when I come back. Tonia—"

He broke off and darted into the bank. The marshal saw the half-breed's narrowed eyes regarding him curiously as he went. Stark hatred, cunning, and desperate design might all have been read in that look had Green possessed the key. But he was too concerned with the business in hand to give it more than a passing thought.

No time was wasted. Andy, having deposited his money, set out at once for the Box B to collect some of his riders. They were to meet at the Double S, for which ranch the marshal, Pete, and the Indian started soon after. Green had declined to take men from the town.

"It's the job o' them two ranchers, an' I reckon they can handle it," he pointed out. "We don't want no army."

Seth Raven had a last word. "What I said goes, Green," he reminded. "An' don't make no mistake this time. If yu don't wanta kill the damn yellow thief yoreself, let yore Injun do it."

"We'll get him," the officer promised, inwardly marvelling at the vindictive emphasis on the last words.

They were met at the Double S by a tall, thin, middle-aged cowboy who had just ridden in from the other direction. This was Renton, the foreman, and his frowning, worried features lighted up when he saw them.

"Durn glad yu've come, marshal," he said, and his tone showed relief. "Thisyer business has shore got me bothered."

Grub's 'bout ready; we can talk as we eat."

He had little more to tell them, save that his riders were still searching the range in all directions. "But that ain't no good," he admitted. "My hunch is she's been carried off, an' our on'y play is to foller, if we can strike an' keep the trail."

A hail from outside proclaimed the arrival of the Box B contingent, which consisted of Bordene, Rusty, and two other riders.

In less than an hour Renton had picked his men, necessities were packed, and the party set out for the spot where the dead horse had been found. This proved to be the mouth of a shallow arroyo about six miles from the ranch and somewhat south of the direct line to the Box B. Here the marshal called a halt.

"Better let the Injun have a clear field," he said, and nodded to Black Feather.

The redskin slid from his saddle and approached the carcass, or what the buzzards had left of it, walking slowly in a half-crouch, his keen eyes scanning every inch of the ground. They saw him circle round it and then head for a mass of brush some thirty yards distant. Behind this he vanished for several moments and then came striding back. His low, throaty words were addressed to the marshal:

"Four Mexican fellas wait there long time," he said, pointing to the brush. "Girl ride by, see them, an' start run. One fella him shoot hoss an' they grab girl." He waved to the south. "Go that way. One hoss, two riders."

The marshal nodded comprehendingly.

"Guess he's got the straight of it," he commented. "The sooner we get on their trail the better. Go ahead, Black Feather; it's El Diablo we're after."

The redskin's black eyes flamed for an instant at the name, but that was his sole sign of emotion. Leaping into his saddle, he led the way to the Border. The abductors had apparently made no attempt to hide their trail, and whenever they crossed a patch of sand the riders could see, from the deeper indentation?, that one of the horses—as the Indian had said—was carrying a double burden.

"They got too big a start for us to catch 'em up," Andy remarked. "We'll have to smoke 'em outa their hole."

"Yeah," the marshal agreed, and then, with a covert glance at his companion, "Funny Raven should get so hot under the collar; I figured the Greaser a friend o' his."

"I'm gettin' new ideas 'bout Raven," Andy said darkly, and the impatience of youth flamed up, "Hell! why didn't yu blow that damned Greaser four ways, Jim?"

"Nobody sorrier than I am, Andy," Green assured him. "Black Feather will search him out, yu betcha; he's got a debt to pay too."

Mile after mile they pressed steadily on, strung out in a double line behind the guide. Once clear of the open range, they dived into the wilder country which lay between them and the Border. Here the pace slackened, for deep gulches and ravines, thick tangles of thorny scrub, hills along the sides of which they wound on ledges barely wide enough for one rider, all had to be faced and overcome. So that night was at hand by the time they reached the sluggish stream which here marked the northern limit of Mexico. Under an overhanging rock near the bank they found the dead ashes of a fire, and not far away the Indian picked up a small leather gauntlet.

"That's one o' Tonia's gloves," Andy pronounced at once. "We're on the right track, anyways; mebbe we'll overhaul 'em yet."

"No catch—find urn," the Indian said.

"He reckons they're still more than twelve hours ahead of us," the marshal explained. "Nothin' to do but keep on their tails."

Andy bit on an oath; he knew it was the only way, but the thought of Tonia in the hands of the bandit, of whose way with a woman there were many tales current on the Border, made him furious.

Camp-fires were lighted, food eaten, sentries posted, and the rest of the men turned in, conscious of a still harder day's work to come.

When the cold light of the coming dawn showed above the eastern horizon the rescue party forded the stream and plunged into what was to all of them, save perhaps the Indian, unknown territory. The tracks they were following headed straight into what appeared to be an expanse of open country, but the guide turned sharply to the right, pointing his horse's head towards a jumble of rocky ridges, the valleys and gorges between which were hidden by close-growing timber.

"We're leavin' the trail; that's a risk, ain't it?" Andy asked. "The Injun is wise to his work," Green replied. "This way may be harder, but I'm bettin' he's got a reason, an' a good one."

Midday found them clear of the barrier of broken country and they saw ahead a broad, billowing stretch of semi-desert, walled in on the far horizon by a jagged line of purple hills.

"Git ready to be grilled, boys," Renton warned, his slitted eyes squinting at the view. "We're pointin' Pinacate way, seemin'ly—volcanic country—all lava an' cactus. I've heard of it. We'll need all the water we can carry; wells ain't

any too frequent."

A meal was eaten, canteens filled at a neighbouring creek, and the journey resumed. Speed was out of the question in the soft sand, and before they had gone very far the Double S foreman's prophecy was being fulfilled. From the sun flaming in the turquoise sky came a stream of heat which burnt like a hot iron, and absorbed perspiration before it had time to form.

"I know now just how the steak feels in the pan," Rusty groaned. "All we want is a nice li'l dust-storm."

Hour after hour they plodded on, halting only at long intervals for a brief meal and a gulp of the tepid contents of their canteens. The approach of night, with cooler air, afforded welcome relief after the sweltering heat. The character of the desert too was changing; the sand was thinning out and hummocks of vitreous rock began to appear. Presently, at the base of a pile of these, the guide pulled up and slid from his saddle.

"Je-ru-sa-lem!" breathed one of the Double S riders. "Am I seein' things or is that real water?"

At the foot of the rocks lay a little pool, shining like a mirror in the last rays of the setting sun.

"It's water, shore enough," another assured him, and tugged on his reins. "Steady, yu son of a devil; yu ain't going to roll in it; we gotta use it too."

Black Feather, who had brought them to it, was a popular member of the party, despite his copper skin. Pete voiced the general opinion:

"Shore was a lucky day for us, Jim, when yu snatched that Injun back from the happy hunting-grounds," he said.

The horses were watered, hobbled, and turned loose to search for the scattered clumps of gramma grass, while their masters squatted round the fires—for desert nights are bitterly cold—and swallowed a much-needed meal. The marshal had a chat with their guide and then joined Andy, Pete, and Renton.

"We're pointin' for Moraga's headquarters, an' the Injun reckons we'll make it some time day after to-morrow," he told them. "Like I figured, this is a short cut, but if they've got the girl there ahead of us, we'll have to study the layout an' plan accordin'. Get all the sleep yu can; it'll be hard goin' the rest o' the way."

The morning light confirmed his statement. In front of them stretched an apparently endless expanse of black lava, fantastically fashioned into ridges, shelves, spires, and massed blocks as though a mighty molten sea had suddenly been frozen into immobility. The edges of the broken lava were as keen as knives.

"Good thing the Injun held out for shod hosses," the marshal remarked, as they commenced the journey. "A few miles o' this would peel the horn clean off their hoofs."

"Well, I dunno what the other trail's like, but I'm votin' for it," Pete said, as his horse slipped on a shining slope and fought furiously to recover its footing.

Helpless targets of a relentless sun, parched by a thirst they dared not satisfy, the riders slipped and slithered on across the burnt-out, forbidding wilderness. For the most part they rode in silence, for inattention to one's mount might mean an awkward accident, but occasionally a rider relieved his feelings with a fervent but humorous curse.

"Hell won't interest me none at all now," Rusty was heard to complain. "Guess I'll have to try for the other place."

Night found them still on the desert, camped at the base of a pinnacle of rock. They had found no more water, but by pulping the interiors of some barrel cactus they managed to supply the needs of themselves and their mounts.

Dead mesquite branches provided a fire, but it was a miserable one, for fuel was hard to find. So that it was good news to hear that the next day would see them clear of the desert.

And so it proved. Early in the afternoon they halted in a long, deep arroyo which contained more vegetation than they had seen for two days. All of this meant water, and they soon found a tiny, sparkling creek.

"Moraga's settlement ain't far away from here," the marshal said. "Me an' Pete is goin' to prospect it some. If we ain't back in a coupla hours yu better come an' look for us. This is a good place to leave the hosses."

Discarding their own mounts and rifles, the two men traversed the arroyo and emerged, with due caution, into the open. Hidden behind lumps of storm-riven lava, they got their first view of the bandit settlement. It proved to be a mere collection of hovels, mostly with rock walls and sodded roofs, clustered beneath the shadow of a jagged cliff, the curving shape of which showed that it had once been part of the wall of a crater. Zigzagging steeply up the weathered face was a narrow path leading to a ledge about two-thirds of the way up. Only one building justifying the name was to be seen—a stout cabin of untrimmed logs standing in the centre of the other habitations.

"That'll be Mister Moraga's mansion, yu betcha," Pete observed. "Lie close—there's a fella who might come our way."

"I'm hopin' he does," the marshal said.

His wish was granted; the man, stepping jauntily and humming a song, passed close to their hiding-place. A quick clutch, which effectively closed his windpipe, and he was behind the boulder, a gun-barrel boring into his ribs.

"Silence, they say, is golden," a voice whispered. "Noise, for yu, amigo, will be leaden. Savvy?"

Apparently the prisoner did, for he submitted silently while his pistol and knife were removed from his belt. Seated on the ground with his back to the rock, he glared in amaze at the grinning cowboys.

"Now yu can talk, amigo, an' I'm advisin' yu to," the marshal said, "Where is El Diablo?"

"Señor Moraga ees in ze beeg cabeen," he said sullenly, adding with vicious emphasis, "he keel you for dees."

"Mebbe," the marshal agreed. "How many men has he got?"

The Mexican's eyes gleamed cunningly. "Ten," he said. Green shrugged his shoulders and glanced meaningfully at the cactus patch. The effect was immediate. "Twenty," came the correction. The Mexican stood up. "Madre de Dios! I spik true, señor; I swear it," the captive cried, crossing himself fervently. "Twenty onlee—no count me."

"Yo're dead right to leave yoreself out," the marshal said. "Where's the girl?" The man looked at him stupidly. "The American señorita fetched in this mornin' by four o' yore men," Green added.

It was a guess, but a good one. The Mexican hesitated, but an impatient movement on the part of Pete decided him; these thrice-damned Gringos were not to be trifled with.

"In ze beeg cabeen," he muttered.

Marching the fellow back into the brush, they tied his hands and feet securely, using his own sash for the purpose, and left him there.

"If we don't make it back yu'll be in pore luck," the marshal told him. "Yu better pray—hard—for our success."

CHAPTER XIX

They found the rest of the party eagerly waiting for their return. After a short consultation with Andy and Renton, it was decided that the attack should be made at once. Moraga was known to control a numerous force, and more of his men might arrive at any moment. The marshal outlined a plan for the advance:

"We'll spread out in a half-circle, Injun up an' drive 'em into the big cabin; that'll give us the shacks for shelter.

Leave the brons here, split up into pairs, an' keep under cover all yu can. Rusty, yu an' Yates make for their corral an' turn the hosses loose. Shoot any fella that tries to get away—they may have help near."

Silently the men slipped away to their posts, with a final order not to shoot until they had a target. The marshal and his deputy returned to the point they had already visited, aiming from there to work up to Moraga's headquarters.

From the shelter of the big boulder they could see the whole of the apology for a street. Several times men came out of the main hut and entered one or other of the shacks, but no shot shattered the silence; the marshal had warned his men to allow time for all to get into position.

Suddenly came a wild yell and a Mexican dashed from one of the dug-outs towards the cabin. Ere he had got half-way, however, a rifle crashed and he went down, sprawling grotesquely in the dust. Instantly the place came to life. Like rats from their holes, men popped out of the sordid dwellings and raced for the more solid haven of the log house. Their appearance drew a volley from the invaders, several dropped, but the rest gained their objective. The marshal smiled grimly.

They had been gradually advancing, crawling on their bellies and taking advantage of every stone or bush which offered protection. Foot by foot the attacking force advanced, closing in on the cabin, but still the problem of the open space in front of it had to be solved. Once the cowpunchers left the shelter of the shacks they would be at the mercy of Moraga's marksmen. Anxiously Green scanned the cliff, but it appeared to be unscalable save for the little path directly behind the cabin. They would have to rush the place, he decided, and in broad daylight, for it was hours yet to darkness and he dared not wait.

The firing now became spasmodic; a defender, fancying he saw a movement, would send a questing leaden messenger, and an attacker would instantly reply, aiming at the other's smoke. The stifling air was further polluted by the pungent smell of burnt powder.

Inside the cabin, Moraga and his men waited for the assault which they knew must come. Two had been killed at the loop-holes and several nicked, but the defence still outnumbered the Americans, and although the guerrilla leader did not know this, he was unperturbed. Though the dispersal of the horses—for Rusty and Yates had done their work—prevented him sending for assistance, he was hourly expecting another of his raiding bands. That the invaders were Gringo punchers comprised his information of them, but he surmised that the abduction of the girl had brought them. With a smirk of satisfaction on his evil, brutish features he opened a door at the back of the main room of the building. On the right of the passage outside was a smaller room, when he entered. Seated on a chair to which her arms were bound was Tonia Sard. The bandit's eyes rested upon her possessively.

"I come to tell you not to be alarm," he said. "The shooting is jus' a leetle argument with some foolish folk who not like me." He drew up his gaudily-attired form with absurd dignity. "There are many such," he went on. "El Diablo is feared, not loved; he desire only, to be loved by one." He swept off his hat in a low bow, and though his keen little eyes must have seen the contempt in her face, his voice did not betray the fact. "I have sent for a padre."

"I would rather be dead than married to you," the girl said stormily.

"There are worse things than death, or marriage to a Spanish caballero," he retorted.

"A Spanish caballero!" Tonia repeated. "A Mexican peon—a leader of ladrones—a yellow dog from whom my riders will strip the hide with their quirts when they catch him."

The disdainful words, stung more deeply than the lashes they promised him. For a moment he stood, fingers convulsively clenched, inarticulate, and she thought he would kill her.

"We weel speak of it again," he said, and there was a threat which chilled her blood in the softly spoken words.

Rejoining his men, Moraga found something else to occupy his attention. The marshal, surveying the cabin from behind the nearest shack, had conceived a plan. It was a desperate chance but—

"It's less'n forty yards an' that door ain't loopholed," he mused aloud. "If a man could get there—"

"He could sit down on that chunk o' lava an' wait till they opened up," Pete said sarcastically.

Green grinned at him. "That bit o' rock is the key to the situation—an' the door," he replied. "Mosey round to the boys an' tell 'em to fling lead regardless when I whistle."

The deputy departed unwillingly, and presently returned with the news that he had passed the word along, and that, beyond a graze or two, there were no casualties among the cowboys. The marshal stood his rifle against the wall, and made sure that his pistols came freely from their holsters.

Green gave the signal. The moment the firing began, he jumped from his shelter, and crouching low, ran for the cabin. Bullets whined past his ears and spat up the sand on all sides of him, but he reached his goal unhurt. Pausing to get some air into his lungs, he stooped to the lump of lava which lay by the cabin entrance. With an effort he raised and flung it at the door, which cracked and shook under the impact. Immediately a hand holding a pistol pointing sideways projected from the nearest loophole. Green drove a bullet into it, saw the weapon fall, and heard the curse of the owner as he withdrew his shattered fingers. Twice he hurled the stone and the door began to sag. Resting again, he wiped the perspiration from his brow and, with a wary eye on the loopholes, surveyed the damage.

"One more an' I reckon she'll cave," he muttered. "Better call the boys."

Uttering a shrill whistle, he lifted the missile once again and drove it at the obstacle. A sound of rending wood was drowned by the yell of the cowboys as they broke from cover and raced for the cabin. With both guns spurting lead, Green sprang through the breach he had made. Flashes lit up the dark interior, a bullet scorched his cheek, another tore off his hat, and then, clubbing his own empty guns, he leapt on the bandits, striking right and left. His men were close on his heels, swarming eagerly through the broken door and plunging into the combat. Driven back by the rush of the invaders, the Mexicans fought desperately, shooting, stabbing, and yelling out wild Spanish oaths and supplications. But they were no match for these hard riders of the plains who fought with a laugh on their lips and struck with an earnestness utterly out of keeping with it. Presently Green, in the medley of the fight, found himself beside Bordene.

"Where's that damn coyote, Moraga?" panted the rancher.

"Ain't seen hide nor hair of him," the marshal replied. "We'll get on his trail; the boys can clean up here."

A search of the rest of the cabin revealed no trace of the girl or the bandit chief. Then Andy flung open a door at the rear of the building, and a bitter curse escaped his lips. Instantly the marshal saw the reason. Half-way up the little track which scored the face of the cliff was the man they sought, and hanging limply like a sack over his shoulder was Tonia. Andy lifted his rifle only to lower it again with a groan; he dared not risk a shot. Green sprang forward.

"C'mon, he can't get far," he cried, and began to climb.

After the first dozen yards the ascent became almost vertical, and the pathway—if such it could be called—was a mere indication that others had gone that way. Slipping on the precarious foothold, jumping at times from one projection to another, hauling themselves up by the stunted vegetation, they struggled on. Slow as their progress was, they gained on the fugitive, who, hampered by his burden, had a task only made possible by previous knowledge of the pathway. They had left their rifles at the foot of the cliff, realizing that they would be an encumbrance.

Andy swore explosively as his foot slipped and he had to grab frantically at a mesquite root to save himself. "I hope to Gawd he makes it," he said, "I'm scared to look up."

"He knows the ground," his friend comforted. "We're coverin' two feet to his one; we'll get him."

From below came the frequent report of a firearm, showing that the cleaning-up process was still in operation. Pygmy figures darted out of the cabin and dived for cover, with others in pursuit. The marshal smiled with grim satisfaction; this portion of Moraga's robber band would make no more raids. He swung himself round a jutting knob of rock and a bullet hummed past his ear, missing by a bare inch. Hurriedly he flattened out. Sixty feet above him the guerrilla chief was standing on the ledge, pistol poised, and a Satanic sneer of triumph on his evil face. He was still holding the girl, who appeared to be unconscious.

"He's got us out on a limb, Andy," the marshal said.

The Mexican, of course, could not hear the words, but he evidently divined what their thoughts must be, for a jeering laugh floated down. The rancher gritted his teeth as he heard it. Moraga held all the cards, and knew it. He had recognized the marshal when he made his dash for the door and was amazed that he should have escaped death in the desert. It was then that he decided upon flight. His taunting tones reached them again:

"El Diablo has more than one home, señor the so clever marshal. We weel take the señorita where you weel never find her."

"Can't we do nothin'?" Bordene growled.

"We can poke our heads out an' get shot," Green told him, and then, "Hell! Look at the cliff above the ledge. Ain't somethin' movin' there?"

At the risk of being bored by a bullet, the rancher wriggled round a bush which obstructed his view. Behind the ledge the crater rim appeared to rise almost perpendicularly and through the sparse growth of cactus, mesquite, and coarse grass he caught a shifting gleam of copper.

"It's Black Feather," the marshal said. "I was wonderin' where he'd drifted. Musta knowed this place plenty well an' gone there a-purpose to stop any getaway."

Eagerly they watched the Indian swing noiselessly down behind the unconscious Mexican. They could see him plainly now. Stripped to the breech-clout he carried only a knife between his teeth, and his bronzed body shone in the rays of the westering sun. Lithe as a mountain lion, he crept nearer and nearer to the ledge and the man standing on it, who had no eyes for anything save those below. With a few yards to go, the redskin slipped and must have made some noise, for the white men saw Moraga whirl round. In a single bound, the Indian landed on the ledge, and the bandit, dropping the girl, raised his pistol. Instead of pulling the trigger, however, he flung the weapon at the intruder's head. Green rapped out an oath.

"Damn the luck. That musta been his last pill he fired at me," he lamented.

Black Feather dodged the missile and began to creep in on the other, knife in hand, crouching, deliberate, implacable as death itself. Moraga, realizing that he was trapped and that his only hope lay in killing the redskin before the cowpunchers could reach the ledge, drew his own knife, with a muttered malediction. With the knowledge that every moment was vital he stepped towards the Indian. Only a couple of yards separated them when Moraga's right hand went up as though preparing to stab, and then—he threw the weapon. Against a white the ruse would have succeeded, but the red man is the only equal to the yellow in the use of cold steel, and Black Feather was not asleep. There was no time to dodge, and with a sudden upward thrust of his own blade he swept the oncoming missile aside, the force of the contact shivering both blades.

Dropping the useless handle, the Indian resumed his slow, relentless advance. But the bandit dared not wait; one desperate chance had failed; he must try again. Gathering himself for the effort, he rushed in, hoping by the suddenness of the onslaught to hurl his foe from the ledge. But the claw-like brown fingers gripped like steel, and powerful as was his short, stocky form, Moraga found himself swung round with his back to the abyss. Savagely he struck at the fierce bronze mask with its bared teeth, and triumphant flaming eyes which bored into his own. Inch by inch he was forced nearer the edge; desperately he tried to clutch his enemy that both might die, but his fingers could get no purchase on the smooth, pigmented skin. His breath came in gulps, his face grew grey as he realized that the end was near, yet he fought on; he was a strong man and he did not want to die.

"I weel give you gold—much gold," he gasped.

The Indian's face twisted into a hateful grin. "Yellow dog's heart turn to water, huh?" he sneered. "Die all same." Inexorably he forced the now exhausted man back and a cold sweat broke out on Moraga's brow as one of his feet left the ledge. Despairingly he tried to twist, clawing frenziedly, and then the end came. The marshal and his companion, still toiling upwards, saw the bandit topple over the brink of the precipice and drop like a stone. They watched the body hurtling downwards. It caught on a projecting mass of choya and hung there for a moment, the bright red tunic like a great splash of blood against the frosty, grey-green of the cactus. For a few brief seconds the cruel claws held and tortured the shrieking form, and then Green fired. With a convulsive shudder, the body broke away and vanished.

When at last they reached the ledge Tonia was free of her bonds and Black Feather again an impassive figure of bronze, but he bore himself like a man who has got rid of a burden. It might well be that the slaying of Moraga had wiped away his shame and put him right with himself, his people, and his gods. He would not listen to thanks.

"No good stay here," he said. "Some fella get away—bring more."

"He's dead right," the marshal said. "We've done what we came to do, an' the sooner we punch the breeze the healthier it'll be for us; we can't lick all Mexico."

Led by the Indian, they descended from the crater rim by a longer but easier route, the one he himself had used. As Green had surmised, Black Feather had known that there was a way up and through the rock, and had guessed that if the fight went against him the guerrilla leader would make a bolt for it, leaving his followers to shift for

themselves. When they reached the cabin again the fighting was finished. Renton, his left arm in a sling, hailed their appearance with a shout and hurried forward to greet his young mistress.

"Shore am glad to see yu again, Miss Tonia," he said, and to the marshal, "Where'd yu find her? We've looked all over."

Green gave a brief account of what had happened; the foreman looked wonderingly at the Indian for a moment and then stepped up to him.

"If yu ever want anythin', any time, come to the Double S an' yu get it," he said. "Shake."

The red man took the proffered hand. "Black Feather a chief, yellow dog have him whipped," he said, as though that explained all, and, from his point of view, it did.

"Well, I reckon yu've done squared the 'count," Renton replied, and turned to the marshal. "We've cleaned up here pretty complete, but a few got clear, an' I've a hunch we oughta be on our way."

"The Indian was saying the same. What's wrong with yore arm?"

"Fella tried to hide a knife in me an' got my wing. 'Bout half a dozen of us is damaged, nothin' serious. Soon as we've fed we better point for the hosses, an' go back the way we come, huh?"

The marshal agreed. The known dangers and hardships of the lava desert were preferable to the possibility of bumping into another bunch of bandits.

CHAPTER XX

The journey back to Lawless was uneventful. The cowboys, elated by the success of the expedition, endured discomfort with cheerful curses. The grave face of their guide alone gave no sign of satisfaction, though there was a deep content in his heart. He spoke seldom, a wave of the hand serving for words.

"Like a bloomin' image, ain't he?" Rusty said. "But I'll risk a stack he's more pleased than any of us; Injuns is plenty deep thataways."

But Rusty was wrong—there was a more contented man in the party than even Black Feather. For Andy Bordene, to be riding side by side with the girl he loved and had so nearly lost, turned even the terrible lava desert into a paradise. Together they watched the sun, a blaze of golden flame, drop behind the misty purple hills, and when its red rim peeped above the horizon they were in the saddle again on their way—home. And home—Andy told himself—was soon going to mean very much more to him than it had ever done, now that he had got his ranch back and was free to speak. Nevertheless, though he had plenty of opportunities—for the others, with knowing smiles, left them much to themselves—Andy could not screw up his courage, until they had crossed the Border and were nearing the Box B. They had lagged behind—a not infrequent occurrence—and a bend in the trail hid the rest of the party. Andy suddenly pulled up, and when the girl's mount instinctively did the same, the young man leaned forward, a look in his eyes which sent the warm blood to her cheeks.

"Tonia, do yu remember my sayin' I'd be comin' to yu for a job some day?" he began, and when she nodded, "the day's here, an' I'm askin'. Honey, the job I want is to look after, work for, an' make Life good for yu always."

His voice was low, husky, and revealed a depth of feeling she had never suspected in this gay, irresponsible playmate of her youth. A wave of happiness swept through her; she had long known the answer she must make, but, woman-like, she had to ask a question:

"Was that the job you were thinking of then, Andy?"

"Shore thing, Tonia; but I was in a money mess an' hadn't the right to speak. Now it's different. Do yu reckon yu could learn to love me, Tonia?"

The girl flashed a tremulous little smile at him. "You could have had that job then, Andy—for the asking," she whispered.

They were still missing when the rescue party rode up to the ranch-house of the Box B, where, as it was late, they had decided to spend the night. To their surprise, they were greeted by Reuben Sarel, who had ridden over in search of news. He had a jaded, worried expression, which increased when he saw that his niece was not with them.

"Ain't yu got her?" he asked.

"Well, we took her away from Moraga all right, but on the trip back somebody else done stole her again," Green said solemnly.

The fat man's face flushed with anger. "Pretty fine lot o' fellas yu must be—" he began, and then the errant pair, trotting leisurely, came in sight, and he understood. "Well, I'm damned! All right, marshal, that's a score to yu," he grinned.

At the sight of the waiting group, the young couple raced for the ranch-house. Tonia won, and jumping from her saddle, flung her arms impulsively round her uncle's neck.

"Well, well, burn me if bein' stole don't seem to suit yu," he said shyly. "I never seen yu look so bonny."

"Guess it depends on who does the Stealm'," Green put in, whereupon the girl got rosier than ever and retreated precipitately to "clean-up."

"Come an' eat, folks," Sarel suggested. "I wanta hear all about it."

In the big living-room the story was told, and Reuben's eyes lighted when he learned how the guerrilla chief had died.

"Served the skunk right," he commented. "I've allus regarded Injuns as pizen, but I'm a-goin' to make an exception; thisyer Black Feather can have my shirt if he wants it."

"Which would make two for him and then leave plenty for patching," Tonia said merrily. Her glance rested affectionately on her bulky relation, and she suddenly sobered. "Uncle, you're not looking well; what's troublin' you?"

Reuben lifted his hands in surrender and turned to the marshal. "Fact is, I am bothered," he admitted. "We're losin' a lot o' cows; somebody's took advantage of our bein' short-handed to steal us blind, an' we can't figure it. Mebbe yu can help us?"

"If Andy'll lend me a hoss I'll look into it to-night," Green said; and when they protested, he explained: "Waitin' means losin' a chance; soon as they know we're all back, the rustlers will lay over for a spell." He shook his head at his deputy. "I'm on'y goin' to snoop around; it's a one-man job, ol'-timer."

* * *

The following morning found Andy, Pete, and the Indian—the latter with Nigger on a lead-rope—covering the trail to Lawless, the rancher's presence being due to an eagerness to conclude his business with the banker. The journey did not add to Pete's entertainment, for Andy was riding in a world of his own, and Black Feather—for conversational purposes—was a hopeless dawn.

"I'll have to get me a parrot," the deputy said, and then raised a whoop when he saw the marshal waiting for them.

The new-comer did nothing to add to the gaiety of the party. He looked tired, and having greeted them and transferred his saddle to Nigger, he relapsed into a moody silence, from which he emerged only once, when he noticed Pete peering anxiously around and asked him what he was looking for.

"The body," the deputy told him. "Thisyer's a funeral procession, ain't it?"

Their arrival in town brought Seth Raven quick-foot to the marshal's office. He halted at the door for an instant when he saw Andy, and then came in. His face appeared strained, and there was an eagerness in his tone.

"Yu got the girl—an' Moraga?" he blurted out.

"Miss Sarel is on her way to the Double S an' the Mexican won't trouble us again," the marshal replied, and gave a bald recital of the rescue.

"Yu done a good job; but why waste a cartridge on that coyote? I'd 'a' left him there for the buzzards to finish," Seth said savagely. "What I promised holds good, marshal."

"Forget it," Green replied. "All in the day's work, Raven. Town behaved itself while we been away?"

"Middlin', till last night, an' then"—he looked at Andy—"the bank was robbed. First we know of it the clerk can't get in this mornin'. We busts the door an' find Potter on the floor of his office an' the place cleaned to a fare-yu-well. Potter has been shot in the head, an' is as near dead as don't matter. Looks like Mister Sudden has turned another trick."

"Anythin' to show that?" Green asked.

"No, 'cept that I saw a fella on a black hoss tricklin' outa town mighty early this mornin'," the saloon-keeper said.

"There wasn't much light, an' I took it yu were back again, marshal. It's shore tough luck for yu, Andy."

The young rancher, rudely awakened from his dream of happiness, shook himself like a dog. Fate had dealt him another bitter blow, but he was not yet beaten. Nevertheless, there was a tremor in his voice as he said:

"It's tougher still on Potter. S'pose the thief didn't take my mortgage, huh?"

"It warn't there, Andy," Raven said slowly. "As a matter o' fact, Potter came to me for money an' made over yore mortgage as security, askin' me not to say anythin' till he'd explained to yu. O' course, I ain't pressin' yu, though the bank robbery has hit me considerable."

The words did not ring true; try as he might, he could not keep the note of exultation out of his voice. The marshal sensed it, and a bitter smile on the rancher's lips showed that he too was not deceived. The half-breed turned to Green:

"Yu bein' away, I sent to Strade, an' I hear he's just come. Reckon you'll find him at the bank. 'Pills' is lookin' after Potter."

"Pills"—known by no other name—was the local medico. A small grey-haired man of perhaps twoscore, with a deeply lined face, he possessed a sharp tongue, which he did not scruple to use. When the saloon-keeper had gone, the marshal turned to Bordene.

"Keep a stiff upper-lip, Andy," he said. "Hills ain't never so steep as they look when you come to climb 'em. I'm a-goin' down to see Strade."

The Sweetwater sheriff opened the bank door himself. "Come right in, marshal," he invited. "I hear yu got that Greaser."

"Yeah. What do yu make o' this?"

"Just nothin'. It's like when the Sweetwater bank was looted four-five months ago, on'y no one was hurt then, the premises bein' unoccupied. Yu heard of it?"

"It fetched me here, bein' put to my account, though I dunno why."

"Stranger on a black hoss with a white face was seen sneakin' outa town, that's why."

"Huh! Raven says he saw the same thing this mornin'—heard the hoof-beats an' got up to look: he figured it was me."

"Sorta suggests our friend is still busy, don't it?" Strade mused. "'Lo, doc, how's yore patient?"

"Couldn't be worse, and live," said the doctor, who had just come from the bedroom at the back to which the injured man had been removed.

"No chance o' gettin' a word out of him, I s'pose?"

"Don't talk like a fool, Strade," Pills snapped. "The shot fractured the back of the skull and it will be a miracle if he opens his eyes again, much less his mouth. If you are looking to him for help, you'd better forget it."

He bustled away, and the sheriff's eyes followed him. "Peppery little beggar, but he knows what he's talkin' about," he said, and added what few facts he had gleaned: Potter had been seen entering the bank soon after ten o'clock; the safe had been opened with the banker's own keys; a few strangers had visited the town, but their movements were known; no one had noticed the shot, which was not unlikely in Lawless. "In fact, there ain't a smidgin' o' evidence to go on," Strade concluded.

The marshal nodded; but his eyes were busy. Slowly they travelled from the ominous stain on the board floor to the books flung hastily from the rifled safe, and back to the desk in the centre of the room. Stooping, he raked beneath this with a ruler, bringing to light a little brass cylinder; it was a used shell, a Colt's .45, and along one side ran a horizontal scratch.

"On'y this," Green said.

The sheriff whistled. "That cinches it," he said; "but don't bring us no nearer; seems to me yu gotta catch this hombre in the act; he's too damn clever. Got a wad this time too; Raven reckons he's shy ten thousand hisself. Well, seein' yo're in the saddle agin, I'll be gettin' back to my lambs. Come over soon an' have a pow-wow."

When the sheriff had gone, Green sat in the banker's own chair pondering over this latest development. The robbery of the bank was another blow at Bordene, and again the saloonkeeper benefited, if, as the marshal more than suspected, he was scheming to obtain the Box B. A big ledger lying on the floor gave him an idea. He turned up Raven's account, only to find a credit balance of nearly ten thousand dollars. So that was true. His mind reverted to the envelope Potter had left with him. Had the man feared the visit of the mysterious outlaw who had laid him low, or—He wished he could open it, but Potter was still alive, and his word bound him.

When he saw Raven later in the evening he made no mention of the empty cartridge he had found. "She's a blind trail," he said, "but me an' Pete'll have a scout round to-morrow an' see if we can pick up anythin'."

He noted that the half-breed seemed to be in unusually good spirits for a man who had just lost a large sum of money, and the point puzzled him. Andy was not visible, having returned to his ranch.

The next day was but just born when the marshal, after giving certain instructions to Black Feather, set out with Pete along the western trail. There was a slight breeze and the air, as yet untempered by the rising sun, was like wine. For a mile or so they followed the trail, and then the marshal swung off to the right, heading for Tepee Mountain. His deputy, who had not yet been told the object of the expedition, now put the question.

"I want to ask the black hoss if he's been rid lately," the marshal informed him.

They found the hidden valley as silent and undisturbed as on the day Green had first seen it. The black horse was there, wild and skittish, but after a short chase they got their ropes on it, permitting a close examination. Both of them noted the absence of saddle-marks.

"Fat as butter—ain't been used for weeks," was Pete's comment. "What's that mean?"

"One o' two things: either that murderin' thief has another black hoss cached somewheres, an' that ain't likely, or he didn't need one for the bank play."

"Which last makes Raven a plain liar. But why—"

"The damn business is all 'whys?'" the marshal interrupted. "P'raps we'll have an answer to one of 'em to-morrow." Pete waited for an explanation of this remark, but it was not forthcoming.

The arrival of Andy Bordene at the marshal's office next morning was followed by that of Renton and two of his men. With Green and his deputy they called at the Red Ace. Raven's eyebrows went up when he saw them.

"Climb a cayuse an' come along," Green said. "Got somethin' to show yu."

The saloon-keeper hesitated for a moment, looking from one to the other. Then he shrugged his shoulders and went for his mount. Five minutes later he was riding beside Bordene, his glance resting speculatively on the leading couple, the marshal and his man. Into his mind a spasm of uneasiness obtruded.

"Where we goin', Andy?" he enquired.

"I know as much as yu do," the young man replied. "Green sent word yestiddy for me to come along. As a shot in the dark I'd say he's mebbe located the rustlers."

"Rustlers?" Raven repeated. "Who's been losin' steers?"

"The Double S—so Reub was sayin'," Andy told him.

Raven rode in silence, his face indifferent, but inwardly he was damning the marshal for interfering. As their course took them farther away from the 88 ranch his suspicions evaporated. By casual but skilful questioning he got from Andy a more detailed account of the rescue of Tonia, and also a pretty accurate idea of how matters stood with the young couple. Moraga had served him a dirty trick there, he reflected, but it had compensations; the loss of his herd money had utterly crippled the owner of the Box B, putting him in the power of his rival.

The marshal and his deputy covered the first few miles in silence, and then Pete's patience was at an end. "Why don't yu chatter some?" he burst out. "Yu might put a fella wise to what's doin'."

"We're goin' to catch a cow-thief or two," Green replied, and told of a discovery he had made on the night they returned from the Border.

"What'll friend Raven say when he sees his men workin' over the Double S brand?" Pete queried.

"I'm a heap more interested in what they're goin' to say," the other smiled. "He's gotta turn 'em down—cold."

The little man slapped his knee in delight. "Somebody'll have to do some tall lyin'," he said. "Hope they ain't takin' a day off."

He was not to be disappointed, for when—less than two hours later—they reached the hidden corral the marshal had happened upon before, the bawl of an enraged steer greeted them. From the cover of the brush rimming the basin the visitors watched Jevons and Leeson throw and tie a cow, and then the former took a running iron from the fire and bent over the prostrate beast. The pungent smell of burning hair and hide assailed their nostrils. The marshal, watching the half-breed, saw his face pale and then flush.

"Damnation, Jevons, what's the meanin' o' this?" he shouted, and spurred his horse down the slope.

Like a flash the two men turned to face him, their hands going to their guns, but they fell away when they saw the rest of the party and stood sullenly waiting. The foreman of the Double S rode forward and looked at the hog-tied steer. His expression was not pretty; that the stolen stock was not his property made no difference; it was in his charge.

"Don't need no explanation far as they's concerned, I reckon," he said, nodding grimly at the two rustlers. "Mebbe yu got somethin' to say, Raven?"

The boss of the 88 whirled upon him. "Why, damn yore eyes, Renton, yu tryin' to say I know anythin' 'bout this?" he asked.

"They're yore men, an' that's yore brand ourn is bein' changed to," the Double S man returned doggedly.

The marshal interposed. "Take their guns," he said, and when this was done, "Yu got anythin' to say, Leeson?"

"I was obeyin' orders—my foreman's," came the sulky reply.

"An' were yu obeyin' orders too, Jevons?" the marshal asked.

The man did not reply; his narrowed eyes were fixedly studying Raven, and there was a threat in them. The saloon-keeper was doing some rapid thinking. The only explanation he could make would expose Reuben Sarel as a thief, himself as a receiver of stolen property, and put an end to his hope of gaining Tonia. Moreover, these cows had been taken without Sarel's knowledge. With callous indifference, he decided that the men must be sacrificed.

"Yu want to ask these fellas anythin', Raven?" Green said.

The half-breed shook his head. "No," he replied. "When men workin' for me put my brand on other folks' cattle, I'm through. Yu can take 'em in, marshal."

"Take 'em in, hell," Renton said roughly. "We got 'em with the goods, Raven, an' they swing here an' now; they's plenty trees."

Raven's shifty glance turned to Green. "Yu can't allow that, marshal," he urged. "These men are entitled to trial, anyways."

Green detected the design. The accused men were keeping quiet because they relied upon Raven to get them out of

the trouble. Taken to Lawless they would be assisted to escape from the flimsy gaol, or acquitted by a packed jury. He determined to force the issue.

"The case is open an' shut, Raven," he said sternly. "There ain't no doubt whatever. Allasame, I'll put it to the vote; there's five of yu—me an' Pete, bein' officers, don't take a hand."

The voting was a mere farce, as the marshal knew it would be—all except the saloon-keeper being in favour of the culprits being hanged forthwith. Green directed Pete and Renton to tie the hands of the rustlers behind their backs, a proceeding which brought a look of fear into Leeson's eyes, and loosened Jevons's tongue. Convinced that his employer was prepared to let him go to his death he was anxious only to bite back.

"Raven," he called sharply, "yu standin' for this?"

The saloon-keeper's face was wooden. "I've done all I can," he said. "Yu know the penalty when yu started stealin' beef."

"Good enough," the foreman snarled, and turned his mean eyes on the marshal. "Yu asked just now if I was doin' this under orders? Well, I was—orders from my boss, that low-down sneak standin' there, an' I can tell you somethin' else about him too—"

"Yu lyin', double-crossin' cattle-thief!"

With the hissed words the half-breed's right hand darted to Andy's belt, there was a roar and a flash, and Jevons rocked on his feet, sagged at the knees, dropped in a twisted heap. Twice his fingers clutched convulsively at the sand, the body writhed, and then was still. A moment of awed silence followed, and then Renton spoke angrily:

"Yu hadn't oughta done that, Raven. Looks like yu was scared o' what he was goin' to say."

The saloon-keeper snapped round. "Who the hell are yu givin' orders to?" he shouted. "I'll do as I please, an' I—" "Hand that gun back, pronto," the marshal cut in, and there was something in the ice-cold, level tones which brought the killer out of his frenzy. He gave Andy the weapon, and when he faced the marshal again all outward traces of his fury had disappeared.

"Sorry, boys," he apologized, "but I done a lot for that fella"—he pointed a thumb at the dead man—"an' to find him stealin' cattle from my friends an' trying to drag me into the dirty deal shore got me goin'. I'm admittin' I was wrong—oughta let him spit out his lies, I s'pose, but I lost my wool."

The explanation deceived no one, but had to be accepted. The marshal soon made his arrangements. Renton and his two men were to take their cattle away and the others would return to town.

"What about that coyote?" asked the Double S foreman, with a nod at Leeson.

"He goes with me," Green decided.

"As well for him," the cowman said grimly, and then: "I'm combin' yore ranch, Raven; I ain't satisfied this bunch is all yu've had."

The owner of the 88 shot an ugly look at him. "If yu can find any more, take 'em," he said evenly.

On the return journey to Lawless the saloon-keeper led the way, moody and alone; Pete and the prisoner—tied to his horse—followed; the marshal and Bordene brought up the rear. They had not gone far when the deputy, to whom a prolonged silence was purgatory, shot a sly glance at the ruffian riding beside him.

"Brace up, ol'-timer," he said. "Things could be wuss, yu know."

The prisoner looked at him hatefully. "Feelin' funny, huh? Well, I ain't," he growled. "Stretchin' a fella for doin' what his foreman told him to do don't seem to me no ways fair."

"Shucks! yu ain't hanged yet," Pete rejoined. "Come clean, an' I'm bettin' the marshal won't be hard on yu. He ain't a bad sort, an' he knows they was on'y usin' yu."

For an instant the man's cunning little eyes flashed and then, "Dunno nothin' about it," he said woodenly.

Not until they reached town did Raven open his mouth, and then, as he got stiffly down in front of the Red Ace, he said: "Better keep this quiet for a bit—we don't want no necktie party. See yu later, marshal."

Late that evening the marshal and his deputy were in the Red Ace when the proprietor came up and greeted them with dry geniality.

"Well, Green, yu got any fresh information outa that cur Leeson?" he asked.

"No, he's a clam, that fella," Green replied. "Mebbe he'll open up when the noose is round his neck."

"A rope's a real persuader," the other agreed. "Hope you have him safe; he's got friends in town."

"He's tied, an' I got all the keys in my pocket," the marshal told him.

"Oughta be good enough," Raven returned, and passed on.

Green's glance followed him speculatively. "Pete, I'm bettin' we've lost our prisoner," he murmured. "He was laughin' at us."

And so it proved. When they reached their quarters it was to find every door locked as they had left it, but the occupant of the cell had vanished.

"Duplicate keys, an' o' course he'd have 'ern," the marshal ruefully decided. "Oughta guessed that, Pete; my head

must be solid bone, right through. He's a clever devil. Gets shut of a man who might yap an' puts me in wrong with the town, damn him."

CHAPTER XXII

The news of the rustling—which could not be concealed for long—with the death of Jevons and the subsequent escape of his companion in the crime, soon faded out in favour of a bigger sensation. The marshal was the first to hear of this, and from the man who produced it. Two days after the disappearance of Leeson he met the half-breed emerging from the bank.

"Just the fella I wanted to see," Raven began. "No, I ain't seen Potter, but the doc. tell me that he's still unconscious an' there can't be much hope of his comin' round. It's about him I'm goin' to talk to yu."

Once more the marshal found himself seated in the little room adjoining the bar. Raven pushed forward a box of cigars, but the visitor preferred to roll himself a cigarette, watching his host the while. The saloon-keeper was too friendly; he appeared to be very pleased with himself, and there was a glint of sneering satisfaction in his foxy eyes.

"Yu know, o' course, marshal, that the bank is cleaned complete—there won't be a peso for anybody?" he began. "It comes mighty near bein' a knockout blow for the town; a good few citizens have lost all their savin's an' some o' the traders'll find it hard to carry on. Ain't that so?"

"Shore is."

"Well, I got a big interest in Lawless an' I aim to have a bigger one, so it don't suit me that the better class o' citizen—the savin', workin' kind—should go broke. Likewise, there's another thing: when Potter first come here he hadn't much capital. I took a shine to the fella, an' reckonin' a bank was wanted, I backed him. It was his lay-out, yu understand—I didn't have no share, but I lent him money. Oh, I got it back—he's a square shooter, is Potter—an' all I stand to lose is what I had there when the robbery took place. So I feel sort responsible, yu savvy?"

The visitor nodded, wondering where all this was leading to.

"That bein' so, I'm goin' to take over the bank, makin' good the losses outa my own pocket. If Potter gets well, I'll hand his business back to him in good shape, an' he can repay me when he's able; if he don't recover, I go on runnin' it. What yu think o' the idea?"

If the saloon-keeper had hoped to surprise the marshal he certainly succeeded; for a moment Green stared at him in frank amazement; somehow, the picture of Seth Raven as a philanthropist would not materialize.

"It's certainly a plenty generous proposition," he said at last. "It shore oughta make yu popular."

There was a sardonic touch in the concluding words, and he watched Raven narrowly as he spoke; but the other man was playing his cards close and gave no sign, though inwardly he cursed the marshal for having immediately hit the mark. That individual tried another roving shot.

"Reckon it'll be good news for Andy Bordene."

Again it failed to produce any outward effect; the half-breed's sallow face was devoid of expression as he replied: "Whatever the books show that the bank owes will be met. I've got Potter's clerk goin' through 'em now. It'll cost a goodish bit, an' there'll be some who'll say I'm on'y lendin' the money an' it'll come back via the Red Ace."

When the marshal returned to his office he found Bordene smoking and chatting with Barsay. The latter, quick to note the storm-signals in his friend's face, promptly asked a question:

"What yu got yore ears set back for? The Vulture been tryin' to bulldoze yu?"

The marshal grinned widely. "That's no way to speak to yore boss, an' it shows a want o' proper respect for the town's biggest benefactor," he replied.

"How long has Raven been a benefactor?" Andy enquired.

The marshal told them of the saloon-keeper's intentions and the eyes of both men bulged.

"If he does that I'll have to alter some o' my ideas about Seth," Andy commented, a visible relief in his tone.

"Durned if I can see why he's doin' it though."

"It's plain enough," the marshal pointed out. "Makes him solid with the town; nobody's goin' to accuse him o' bein' in on that rustlin' after this. Don't vu be glad too soon, Andy; I've a hunch there's a string tied to it far as yo're concerned."

The prediction proved correct. Entering the Red Ace that evening, Andy found the place packed. The news of the saloonkeeper's intended generosity had spread through Lawless like wildfire, and not only those directly affected, but nearly every other dweller, wanted to see the man who was about to give away thousands of dollars.

Standing with his back to the bar, the half-breed's black eyes gleamed with triumph as he received the thanks and homage of the throng. A contemptuous pride filled him and his narrow, warped soul sneered at and despised every

one of them. Then came the man he hated most of all, who stood in the way to his cherished ambition. Bordene walked straight up to him.

"This is a mighty fine thing yo're doin', Seth," he began. "I gotta thank yu."

"What for?" asked the half-breed, with unsmiling lips, though his joy was hard to hide; this was the moment he had been lusting for.

The cold query took the young man aback. "Why, I understand yo're re-openin' the bank an' givin' every customer the balance held when the robbery took place," he replied.

"That's correct," Raven said. "I've got a list o' the losses; your account don't show no balance."

"But I gave Potter thirty thousand just before I went after Moraga," Andy protested. "Yu were there."

"I heard yu say somethin' about it, an' that's all," Raven retorted. "Yu might 'a' changed yore mind. Anyways, there's no record in the books, an' the clerk knows nothin' of it."

"He warn't present," Andy said. "I was in such a tear that I just gave Potter the notes an' didn't wait for a receipt or anythin', Damn it all, Seth, yu don't think I'd lie to yu?"

The half-breed shrugged his shoulders. "A man who's broke'll do a deal for thirty thousand," he said insolently, and when he saw the rancher's jaw tighten, he added, "Mebbe Potter took a chance on yore not comin' back. All I know is the bank ain't liable. Another thing, this business is goin' to cost me a lot, an' I want that mortgage on the Box B redeemed pretty prompt."

"Knowin' damn well that I can't do it," the rancher said angrily.

"I dunno nothin' about yore affairs, an' I ain't carin'," the saloon-keeper replied.

It did not need the hard, merciless tone nor the sneering look to convince the cowman that any appeal would be useless. When he spoke again his voice was low, vibrant :

"Yu seem to hold the cards, but I reckon the deck was stacked. Whatever you want belongin' to me yu'll have to fight for, Raven."

For a long moment the two men faced one another, brown eyes clashing with beady black ones. The half-breed was the first to turn away, silently cursing the mother who bore him. He sent a venomous glance after the young man as he left the bar.

"I'll make yu pay to the last cent," he muttered. "I'll take yore ranch, yore girl, an' break yore damned heart."

But Bordene had spoilt his evening; he could not forget that, for all his popularity, he had once again quailed under the gaze of a hated white.

* * *

Renton's return to the Double S with the stolen steers and his story of what had happened produced an extraordinary revolution in the mind of Reuben Sarel. Shame at the thought that he had allowed himself to be used by such a man as Raven overrode every other consideration.

"The dirty dawg oughta be strung up," he grated, and the foreman was amazed at the savage tone of his usually mild and easy-going manager.

"Meanin' Jevons?" he asked.

"Meanin' his thievin' boss, who killed him to close his mouth," retorted Sarel.

"Which is my sentiments to a dot," the foreman agreed. "But thinkin' an' provin' is two different things."

Reuben nodded gloomily and Renton left him pacing up and down the veranda. Absorbed in his thoughts, he did not notice that Tonia was watching him with a mischievous smile.

"So glad you've made up your mind to do it at last," she said.

Sarel spun round, his fat face flushing. Hang it, had the girl read his thoughts? But the merry, affectionate look told him this could not be.

"To do what, Tonia?" he asked.

"Take that exercise you need, of course," she laughed. "I notice you don't go far from a chair though."

Reuben dropped wearily into a seat. "Quit yore foolin', girl, an' sit," he said. "I got somethin' serious to tell yu."

There was an awkward pause and then he blurted out, "I've been double-crossin' yu, Tonia. No, don't say nothin'—just listen."

Head down, drooping in his chair, he told the whole sordid story. How he had got deeper and deeper in debt, and, realizing the hopelessness of ever being able to pay, had yielded to his creditor's crafty offer to take Double S cattle.

"I was allus meanin' to pay yu back, lass, but the cussed luck wouldn't change, an' I on'y got mired worse'n before," he pleaded. "An' with that devil threatenin' to tell you..."

His voice tailed away miserably, and he could not look at her. Tonia rose and put an arm round his neck.

"Yu dear old silly, as if I care a hoot about the stupid cows," she soothed. "Why didn't you tell me and save yourself all these months of worry? I suppose that was why you thought that cur would make a good husband for me?"

"I never thought that, girl, but he had me roped," Reuben replied. "I knew I'd oughta throw him outa the place, but I ain't the man yore father was. I've been a poor sorta guardian."

"You've been very good to me," she said, "and you're not to think anything different. As for Mister Raven—" she stopped suddenly and her cheeks grew rosy. "Andy's coming, and he looks as though he'd been washed and hung out to dry."

The simile was not inapt, for Bordene sat draped over his saddle, chin on chest. At the ranch-house he got down listlessly, threw the reins, and stepped heavily forward. He appeared a tired and dispirited man, but at the sight of the girl he forced a smile to his drawn lips.

"Howdy, folks," he greeted.

His attempted gaiety did not deceive the girl. "What's the matter, Andy?" she asked quietly.

The boy smiled bitterly. "Nothin' the matter, Tonia, 'cept we gotta change that job yu were goin' to give me into one o' ridin' for yu."

"What rubbish vu kids talkin'?" the fat man enquired. "Tryin' to tell us yu lost yore ranch, Andy?"

"I reckon it amounts to just that," he replied dully, and went on to tell of Fate's final blow to his hopes. They had heard of the robbery, but had not known that Andy was deeply affected. Raven's bid for popularity was news, and they stared open-eyed at Bordene when he related his conversation with the saloonkeeper. "I paid the money to Potter, an' what he did with it the Lord on'y knows," he said in conclusion. "O' course, I was dumb to hand it to him thataway, but—"

Tonia nodded understandingly, and her look was a caress. "It was because I was in danger, Andy, wasn't it?" she said. "Since Raven holds your mortgage, it would naturally be inconvenient to hand you the money to redeem it, and he couldn't play favourites, so I am not surprised there is no record in the bank books."

The two men looked at her. "That's sound reasonin', but could he get at 'em?" Sarel asked.

"Of course he could—he'd be the first sent for, in the marshal's absence," Tonia pointed out. "And, anyway, he could buy the soul of that clerk of Potter's for a few dollars."

"I'm bettin' yo're right, Tonia, but what can we do?" Andy said. "He's got the town eatin' outa his hand now." The girl smiled at him. "I'm going to pay off your mortgage, Andy; the Double S will be good enough security for that amount."

"No, I won't have you involved in this," the young man protested. "I'd sooner let him have the ranch."

Sarel slapped his knee in delight. "She's right, boy," he cried. "The Box B at twice the sum is a bargain; why shouldn't Tonia have it instead o' that schemin' skunk, huh? On'y point is, where we goin' to borry that much coin?"

"From the bank at Sweetwater," Tonia told him. "It's no use your saying anything, Andy; I am going to beat that beast if it takes every dollar I possess."

But, as they were soon to learn, their enemy had a card up his sleeve, one powerful enough to shatter their hopes and cast them utterly in the dust.

CHAPTER XXIII

Breakfast was over at the Double S, and Reuben Sarel had climbed into the buckboard and set out to interview the manager of the Sweetwater bank. Tonia, having seen him off, went about her household duties. She was in the midst of a gay little song when a rattle of hoofs outside brought her to the veranda. The song ceased and her face hardened when she saw the lank, stooping figure of the saloon-keeper, head forward, his coat-tails suggesting the wings of the carrion-eating bird to which men likened him.

"Mornin', Tonia, yo're lookin' right peart," he commenced. "Reub around?"

"My uncle has gone to Sweetwater," she replied, flushing at the caller's familiar manner.

"Well, I guess we can get along without him—two's company, ain't it?" he said with a smirk, as, not waiting for an invitation, he stepped on the veranda and sat down.

"If your business is with my uncle—" she began.

"Take a seat, Tonia. My business—though I shore wouldn't call it that—is with yu," the visitor told her. "An' I'm bettin' yu can guess what it is."

The girl sat down. "I haven't the remotest idea," she said.

"I've allus understood that a pretty gal is wise when a fella comes a-courtin'," he leered.

"Courting? You?" Tonia cried. He was right, she had known, but now that the thing had actually happened, the enormity of it staggered her.

"Why not? I ain't so old," he urged. "See here, girl, I don't have the trick o' pretty speeches, but I'm askin' yu to marry me. As my wife yu'll be somebody; I got the dollars."

"You can leave that entirely out of it," Tonia said quietly. "For the rest, I don't like you, Air. Raven, and I am already promised."

"To Andy Bordene, huh?—the half-wit who, when I say the word, won't be worth ten cents."

"And even then preferable to one who makes his money by selling poison to poor fools, cheating at cards, and stealing other folks' cattle," she flamed.

The half-breed's yellow cheeks burned redly at the accusation, and his little eyes were alight with rage as he saw his hopes go glimmering. But she was lovely and desirable even in her anger, and he fought to control the passion that devoured him.

"So yu think I'm a rustler, huh?" he said. "Well, I'll tell yu somethin'. When I shot Jevons, it was for yore sake. The cattle he was charged with stealin' were handed over, on the quiet, by yore manager."

"Nothing of the kind. The cattle were mine, and he had my permission to take them," she said hotly.

"After he had crawfished, mebbe," the man said shrewdly. "Shucks! war-talk won't get us anywheres. What yu gotta understand is that it depends on yu whether Bordene gits another chance."

To his astonishment she laughed outright. "I am quite aware of it," was her reply. "That is why Uncle Reuben has gone to Sweetwater."

The merriment and triumphant tone brought a deeper scowl on the face of the unwelcome suitor, but, to her chagrin, he showed no discomfiture. On the contrary, a wintry smile distorted his thin lips.

"If he's expectin' to git a loan at the bank on the Double S he's due for a disappointment," he stated.

It was now Tonia's turn to be surprised. "I don't know what you mean," she said.

"Yu will," he sneered, and added harshly. "Look here, girl, yu've been takin' a middlin' high hand with me, an' so far I've let you run on the rope. But the rope's there, an' it's time yu took a tumble." He waved a hand at the range lying before them. "Yu think yu own all this?" he asked, and, when she nodded, "Well, yu don't, an' that's why the Sweetwater bank won't lend yu money on it."

"You must be crazy," Tonia said.

He grinned wolfishly. "Not any." He drew a paper from his pocket. "This is a deed o' mortgage on the Double S, executed by yore father shortly afore he—died, an' given to me as security for sixty thousand dollars lent by me. Look for yourself."

He held the document out and she saw that he was speaking the truth. For a moment the revelation stunned her and then she rallied.

"That is not my father's writing."

"No, Potter drew it up an' witnessed yore dad's signature. Nothin' crooked 'bout that, huh?"

She could find no answer; the news had hit her like a landslide, sweeping away all hope. She forced herself to speak:

"Why have you kept silent about this?"

"Didn't wanta worry yu, Tonia," he replied, and his voice was less harsh. "Hoped I'd git the Double S in a pleasanter way, an' tear this up." He tapped the deed. "I'm still hopin'," he added.

Tonia drew herself up, and the look that had been her father's shone in her steady eyes.

"Please remember that I am 'Tonia' only to my friends, Mr. Raven," she reminded. "As for your proposal, why I'd sooner marry a Gila monster."

The bitter scorn and contempt stung him like a knotted whiplash, rousing the dormant savage in his nature. Leaping to his feet, his face a mask of fury, he poured out a stream of threats and curses, his clenched fist raised as though to strike her.

"Yu damned Jezebel," he raved, "I'll tame yu—I'll lower yore pride. I'll get—"

"Outta here, if yu're wise."

An iron hand seized his collar, shook him like a rat, and flung him backwards so violently that he catapulted over the veranda rail and spread-eagled, face downwards, in the dust. Looking up, he saw the marshal standing above him, a gun in his hand, and death in his eyes. Visiting Renton, he had walked up from the bunk-house and come upon the scene unobserved.

"Fade, yu yellow dawg," Green rasped, and kicked the man's hat towards him. "If I catch yu speakin' to Miss Sarel again I'll make yu dumb for keeps. Now, climb that bronc and vamoose; yu don't improve the scenery, none whatever."

Seth Raven picked up his hat, dusted himself, and moved towards his mount. For an instant he glanced at the girl as though about to speak, but the marshal was not one to utter idle threats and he thought better of it. Only when he was some hundreds of yards away did he turn and shake a furious fist at them. The marshal grinned as he saw the action.

"Played it safe, didn't he?" he said. "What's the coyote been doin' to upset yu, Miss Sarel?"

"He wants to marry me," she told him.

"Wish I'd broken his neck," Green said fervently. "I reckon yu set him back some."

"I said I'd rather marry a Gila," she confessed, a glint of a smile lightening her woebegone face.

"Which shorely showed yore good taste," the marshal laughed. "Well, I'm bettin' he won't bother yu no more."

"But he will—both Andy and myself are in his clutches," she said miserably, and related the rest of her conversation with Raven. The marshal's face lengthened.

"That's bad—that's awful bad," he admitted, when he had heard it all. "No reason to doubt the genuineness o' that paper he showed yu, I s'pose?"

"It looked like Daddy's signature."

"Potter is the king-pin," Green mused. "If he could speak—"

"I'm sorry to have made trouble for you."

"Don't yu worry yore head about that. I never was a popular fella anyways. I'm on my way to Sweetwater to see Strade. Keep a-smilin'; Raven ain't got yore ranch yet."

She watched him swing up into the saddle with the easy grace of the born horseman, and ride away. Three times this long, lithe puncher, with his slow Southern drawl and level, smiling eyes, had, like a veritable knight of the plains, come to her rescue, and it heartened her to know that he was on her side. Nevertheless, the future looked bleak enough, and the mere thought of losing the home she loved brought a lump into her throat.

* * *

As the marshal rode along the street of Sweetwater a shabby, hard-featured woman came out of a store, and at the sight of him, stood staring.

"Say, mister, who's that fella?" she asked of a passer-by.

The Parson, for he it was chance had thrown in her way, pulled up and eyed her curiously. "Town marshal o' Lawless—calls hisself Green," he replied. "Why, do yu know him?"

"Not by name," she said. "Over to Texas they used to call him Sudden."

The passer-by became alert. "The outlaw?" he queried.

The woman nodded. "He had a hard reputation, but I reckon it warn't deserved; he did me a mighty good turn onct, an' I've heard of others."

Pardoe thought rapidly. "Unless yu wanta do him a mighty bad turn yu'll keep mum 'bout him," he urged. "It's all right with me—I ain't sayin' a word; but if folks here found out who he is they'd hang him quicker'n scat."

"My land, mister, I'm obliged to yu for the warnin'," she said earnestly. "Yu can reckon me dumb, if I am a woman. I wouldn't have harm come to him through me for all the gold in Mexico; he's a good fella, say what they like."

The gambler's cunning eyes watched her hurry away, and saw the subject of their conversation enter the sheriff's office. Then he slid into the nearest saloon, bought a drink, and sat down to think things over, keeping a wary eye on the sheriff's door.

"If I take him in Raven will be tickled to death," he reasoned. "Make me marshal, likely, and mebbe I'll find where he cached the plunder."

The matter satisfactorily decided, he absorbed another drink, and departed by the back door to make the necessary preparations.

* * *

The sheriff leaned back in his chair and regarded his visitor thoughtfully. He had just heard the latest news from Lawless, and his frown showed that he did not like it.

"Allus had doubts 'bout Raven—dunno why—'count of his mixed blood, I reckon; sooner trust an honest-to-God Injun myself," he said. "He certainly 'pears to have them two ranchers roped."

Green asked an apparently irrelevant question: "Was it ever found out who bumped off Anthony Sarel?"

The sheriff shook his head. "No evidence a-tall," he replied. "The body warn't robbed an' he had no known enemies; Tony was a good fella an' well liked."

"Where was Raven at the time?"

"Couldn't say—no one knowed quite when the killin' took place. Tony left town 'bout midday an' he warn't found till evenin', when one o' his outfit happened on him. Yu don't think—?"

"I'm shootin' in the dark; but, holdin' that mortgage, he had a good reason for wantin' Sarel out o' the way, an' he wasn't in town when the stage was held up nor when Bordene was bushwhacked. Then there's the hoss."

"What hoss?" the sheriff enquired.

Green told of the tracking of Andrew Bordene's murderer over the Border and back again, and the finding of the hidden black in the little valley. Strade's eyebrows went up.

"Odd, that," he admitted. "Near the 88 too. Yu figure that Raven is yore double?"

"Can't go as far as that, but yu gotta allow that if he's tryin' to corral the ranches, Sudden the Second has helped him

a whole lot. O' course, it might be someone workin' for him. I thought o' Leeson but he ain't got the guts, an' Jevons—wish I knew what he was goin' to tell us."

"Five minutes' talk with Potter would clear the air some, I'm thinkin'."

"That's the cussed luck of it—every leak stopped," the marshal grumbled, and suddenly sat up. "Hell's bells, he mighta robbed the bank hisself."

"But he's returnin' the money," the sheriff protested.

"Not Andy's thirty thousand, the loss of which practically gives Raven the Box B," Green pointed out. "An' if Potter was gettin' dangerous—" He ruminated for a moment. "It was on'y Raven who saw a fella on a black hoss sneakin' outa town that night."

The sheriff whistled softly. "Puttin' her thataway, it seems you might be right," he agreed. "But provin' it is somethin' else."

The marshal nodded moodily. "Most o' them damn fools in Lawless wouldn't hear a word against him just now. Can yu imagine Raven givin' money away?"

"He's gettin' good value," Strade said. "He'd sell what he might call his soul for power. As an Injun, he'd 'a' been chief of his tribe, or nothin'; that's the kind o' man he is." Which showed that the sheriff had gauged the saloon-keeper correctly without divining the basic hatred behind his obsession. "Wonder why he made yu marshal?"

"He took it that bein' down an' out I'd dance to his tune," Green replied. "He pretty near said it, an' mebbe I didn't contradict him."

"Yu'll need to watch out now yu've shown yore hand," Strade warned.

"Yu don't have to tell me that," the marshal said grimly. "I saw Jevons die."

The sheriff held out his hand. "So long, yu blame' outlaw," he smiled. "Send when you want me. By the way, there's a Lawless man here to-day—they call him the 'Parson.' Know him?"

"Yeah, tin-horn card-sharp," Green said scornfully. "He ain't dangerous—even at poker."

It would have certainly surprised him to know that the man who was not "dangerous" was even then riding the trail to Lawless, seeking diligently the best place to "hole up" and wait with a levelled gun for the "outlaw" who had, as he believed, despoiled him. He found what he wanted where the trail traversed a tiny hollow, the sides of which were masked by brush sufficiently high and dense to cover both man and mount. Selecting a spot to his liking, the bushwhacker squatted down, his rifle ready, his cold, expectant gaze on the road to Sweetwater.

Half an hour passed and he heard the dull thud of hoofs again; this time there could be no mistake. The big, black horse was moving at a fast lope, his rider sitting slackly in the saddle, deep in thought. Now that the moment had come the gambler's nervousness left him. Planting his feet firmly, he trained his weapon on a point in the trail immediately opposite and when the horseman reached it, fired. The marshal, jarred out of his meditations by the crash of the report and the passage of a slug through his hat, snatched out a gun, drove a bullet into the puff of smoke in the brush, and, realizing the futility of argument, spurred the black. His chance shot, though it did no more than cut a furrow in the bushwhacker's cheek, disconcerted him so much that by the time he was ready to fire again horse and rider were a diminishing dot on the trail.

"Missed him, my God!" swore the disappointed killer. "An' he damn near got me too." He wiped the blood from his face and swore again at the smart. "Have to let Seth handle it, after all," he went on. "But I ain't startin' yet; he'll mebbe wait for me."

The marshal had no intention of doing so; he was pushing for Lawless at the best speed the big, knotted muscles of the black could produce. He knew what his chances were against a hidden adversary and was not disposed to take them.

"It ain't often I play safe, Nig," he told his horse, "but this is one time, I reckon, when I gotta copper a bet."

CHAPTER XXIV

Some two hours after the marshal, Pardoe effected an inconspicuous return to Lawless and made his way to the Red Ace. He was tired, for he had not dared to keep to the trail, and a devious route had proved exhausting. Having first peeped in and ascertained that Green was not present, he entered the bar.

"Where's the boss?" he asked.

"In his room, an', if yore business ain't pressin', I'd postpone it," Jude told him. "He's 'bout as sociable as a grizzly b'ar with the bellyache."

Pardoe stepped to the door of the office, opened it, and walked in. The saloon-keeper was sitting in the chair behind the desk, chin on his chest. Beneath his frowning brows his narrowed eyes shot a look of anger at the intruder.

"What the hell du yu want?" he growled. "I told that fool out there—"

"Jude tried to head me off, but I had to see you," Pardoe replied.

"Come to pay back that five hundred?" Raven asked sneeringly.

The taunt did not have the effect he intended, for the gambler achieved the nearest he could to a smile. "Yeah," he said. "What I gotta tell yu oughta be worth that—an' more."

"I'm the judge o' that," was the retort. "Spill it."

Pardoe placed his hat on the desk, sat down, and helped himself to a cigar. When he had lighted it to his satisfaction he said coolly:

"The marshal ain't no particular pet o' yores, is he?"

"I hate him," the half-breed hissed.

"Seen him visitin' the sheriff in Sweetwater to-day," Pardoe went on. "Yu send him there?"

"No," snapped the other. "But I'm goin' to send him to visit the Devil one day."

The gambler grinned. "Odd that. I had the same idea—waited for him on the back trail, but I missed him. He's shore lucky."

"Lucky? You musta been drunk," Raven said angrily. And then, as another phase of the incident struck him, "What yu wanta plug him for?"

"Don't like the jigger, for one thing, an' yu can add to that he's holdin' down a job I could fill pretty comfortable my own self," Pardoe explained.

"It ain't one for folk as miss," the half-breed sneered. "An' seein' yu did, there's no vacancy."

The biting tone left the other unmoved; he was sure of his triumph. "There will be soon," he said quietly. "See here, Seth; the whole blame' country will have the laugh on Lawless when what I've found out in Sweetwater to-day gets around; the marshal has shore run a raw blazer on yu an' this township. Do I git his job if I wise yu up?" Raven nodded, and the gambler went on: "Do yu know what they call yore marshal over to Texas?"

"How the hell should I?" Raven enquired.

Pardoe laughed maliciously. "Yu wouldn't, o' course. Well, he's known there as 'Sudden,' the outlaw."

The half-breed sprang to his feet. "What?" he cried, and, with an incredulous shrug, "Yu been feedin' on loco-weed, ain't yu?"

"It's true enough," Pardoe assured him, and told how he had come by the information.

"Mebbe she's mistook," Raven doubted, but his eyes glistened with satisfaction.

The gambler shook his head. "She ain't; I remember him myself now. Knowed I'd seen him afore, but couldn't fix him. No, sir, he's the one an' only original Sudden, an' yu may lay to it."

The phrase brought a half-grin to Raven's face, and a point to decide. Pardoe did not know that since the marshal was undoubtedly in Lawless when the stage was robbed there must be a second "Sudden" in the field. This was the reason for his enmity—he believed Green had stolen his money, and it suited the saloon-keeper that he should go on thinking so.

"We've got him—cold," the saloon-keeper exulted. "Thisyer town will stand up on its hindlegs an' howl when it learns how he's razzle-dazzled it, an' it'll howl for blood too."

"One thing, he couldn't 'a' done the bank job," Pardoe said.

Raven laughed aloud. "He could, an', by God! I believe he did," he cried. "If not, why didn't he stay with the rest of 'em at the Box B that night?"

"It'll be a shock for Strade."

"Yo're shoutin'—an' for some others. I reckon Lawless will take notice when I speak, after this."

"Yu'll be a big man, Seth," the gambler offered, a shade of envy in his tone.

"Yu betcha," the saloon-keeper agreed. "Things is comin' my way, Pardoe, an' I shan't forget anyone what helped me. Now yu keep this strictly behind yore teeth for now. We're holdin' a winnin' hand; I gotta think out the best way to play it."

"I reckon yo're just as pleased I missed him, Seth?"

"Pleased, Parson?" Raven repeated. "If yu'd wiped him out I'd never 'a' forgiven yu. Death thataway ain't nothin'.

It's when yo're young an' strong, full o' the lust of life, an' yu have to wait for the moment yu know it'll be taken from you... An' that ain't no dream—now," Seth returned. "But keep yore face closed. Sabe?"

The Parson nodded and went out. When the door had closed behind him the saloon-keeper gave free rein to his exultation.

"Yu were the one card I wanted to fill my hand, Mister Sudden, or Green, or whatever yore damn name is," he cried.

"With yu cinched, I've got the rest of 'em like this." He spread out his hand, closing the talon-like fingers slowly.

"Gotta get busy," he went on. "To start with, we'll sent for Strade; I'll enjoy givin' him a jolt." He scribbled a note to the sheriff and went in search of a messenger.

* * *

In the middle of the night the marshal and his deputy suddenly awakened to find the room full of men. By the light of a lantern someone was holding aloft, they could see that the intruders were Raven, The Parson, and a number of the "hardest" denizens of the town. Every man of them, save the saloonkeeper, had his gun out, and the expressions on the scowling faces showed that the threat was no vain one. Green sat up, making no attempt to reach his weapons.

"What's the trouble, Raven? Yu wantin' me?" he asked coolly.

"Not now—we got yu," the half-breed jeered. "Reach for the roof, both o' yu, an' keep on doin' it."

Realizing that they had no option, the two men obeyed. The marshal had no idea what it all meant, but he saw that, for the moment, he was powerless; Seth Raven held the cards. "If this is a joke—" he began.

The harsh merriment of the other stopped him. "Yu got it," Raven said. "Just a little joke to square off for the one yu plastered on this town; on'y the last laugh is the best, an' we're goin' to have that. Git their guns an' search out that damn redskin." This to his followers.

"That's no way to speak o' yore relations," Pete put in.

For an instant Raven's eyes glared murder, and then, with a tremendous effort of will, he regained control of himself.

"An' hang him when yu find him," he ordered.

Two of the men searched the place and returned with the news that the Indian was not to be found. Raven turned savagely on Pete.

"Where is he?"

The plump little puncher grinned cheerfully as he replied, "Yore guess is as good as mine, brother; he was in the shack when we turned in, so he musta lit out when yu come. P'raps he don't like mongrels any more'n we do."

This second reminder of his ignoble origin brought the fury back into the half-breed's face, and his voice was pregnant with it:

"Yu'll pay for that to-morrow—pay in full. I'll make yu wish yu'd never been born."

"Shucks! that's somethin' you can't do," the deputy returned easily. "Whatever happens to-morrow, I've had a middlin' good time up to now."

Raven stalked to the door.

"Watch the place all round, an' if they try to git out shoot 'em down," he ordered.

When they were alone again, Pete rolled and lighted a smoke. "What's at the back o' this caper, Jim?" he asked.

"Haven't a notion," the marshal replied. "Whyfor must yu go baitin' him an' get yoreself in bad? It's my hair he's after."

"Hell, I ain't takin' no backwash from trash like him," the little man responded. "An' when I throw in with a fella it's to the finish."

"Yo're several sorts o' a damn fool, but—I'm thankin' yu," Green told him.

"Yu reckon they're goin' to hang us?" the deputy asked.

"Well, Raven's natural instincts would suggest somethin' more lingerin', but I doubt if even the roughnecks o' Lawless would stand for torture, so he'll string us up the stupidest way," Green said, and added: "Well, I'm a-goin' to hit the hay; looks like we're in for a busy day."

In a little while his steady breathing showed that he was asleep. Pete was not so fortunate; for an hour he lay staring into the darkness, thinking of what was to come.

"He's the coolest cuss I ever met up with," he muttered. "Wonder where that damn Injun slid to? Bet he's workin' sixty minits to the hour; he don't like Raven neither."

He stole to the window and peered out. In the faint, diffused light of the stars he could see the blurred form of a man, carrying a rifle, pacing slowly to and fro. Presently another joined him.

Pete knew the men: toughs, both of them, belonging to that mysterious portion of the community the members of which never appeared to work but always had money for drink and cards.

"Pete," came a whisper.

The deputy spun round to find Green sitting up, and standing near was the familiar form of Black Feather. The Indian, it appeared, divining that Raven and his men spelt trouble, had slipped out of the window of the kitchen, and, finding the place surrounded, climbed to the flat roof of the shack. As soon as the coast was comparatively clear he had dropped on one of the guards, knocked him senseless with his gun-butt, and re-entered the building.

"Good work. Black Feather heap big chief," Pete commented. "What do we do now, Jim?"

"Go out the way he come in, get out hosses, an' head for the Box B," the marshal decided.

According to the redskin, there were only four guards. The one on the kitchen side had already been disposed of; the man at the back was their danger. The marshal devised a plan. Cautioning the others to await his signal, he

climbed out and helped himself to the revolver off the still form lying in the shadow of the wall. Then he walked towards the rear of the building. In a few moments a man appeared dimly in the gloom, approaching him.

"All quiet, yore side?" the stranger queried.

The voice told the marshal who it was. "Shore, Parson," he mumbled. "There's on'y one thing—"

"What's that?" asked the other, and came closer.

The moment he was near enough the marshal leapt, his fingers closing round the man's throat and choking the cry of alarm before it was born. The steady, strangling pressure soon reduced the victim to helplessness and a tap from the marshal's pistol-barrel tumbled him, a limp heap, to the ground. His sombrero deadened both, the noise and force of the blow, but Pardoe would be harmless for some time. Having ascertained this, and collected the fallen man's belt, which to his great content he found to be his own, the marshal gave the signal. Silently they stole to the Red Ace corral, secured their horses, and started for the Box B. When they were safely on their way Pete emitted a chuckle.

"I'm bettin' that Raven person will be a good one to steer clear of to-day," he opined.

In the pale light of the dawn Green looked at the little man and laughed. "Sorry you feel like that, Tubby," he said.

"We're goin' to see him." Then, noting the other's bewilderment, he added, "Did yu allow I'd run away?"

"Huh!" Pete snorted. "I claim to be as plucky as the next fella, but I'd run from a rope every time. Dancin' on nothin' never did strike me as humorsome."

"Mebbe Raven'll reconsider them projects if we go back with the Box B an' Double S outfits behind us," Green suggested.

"Make a difference, o' course," Pete admitted. "But there's a jag o' men in that town."

"Some of 'em friends of ourn," the marshal reminded.

The deputy subsided, but he was not satisfied; it seemed to him nothing short of madness to go back to Lawless, and when they reached the Box B he again protested, only to find Andy on the marshal's side.

"Shore we'll go with yu," the rancher cried. "That bird is flyin' too high an' it's time his pin-feathers was trimmed. Hey, Rusty, round up some o' the boys, an' tell 'em to come loaded for trouble."

During breakfast Andy got the whole story of the previous day's happenings, and his face grew stormy when he heard of the hold Raven claimed to have on the Double S.

"Throw Tonia out, will he, the dirty hound? Not while I can pull a trigger," he growled. "I'm obliged to yu again, marshal, but I wish yu'd broken his damned neck."

Accompanied by Rusty and half a dozen well-armed riders, they made for the Double S, and since they wasted no time on the trip, they arrived before the men had dispersed to their different duties. Tonia met them at the door with a look of relief which her first words explained.

"When I saw you in the distance I thought it was that man coming to turn us out," she said.

"We're goin' to turn him out, or, anyways, show him where he gets off," Andy told her grimly, and related what had happened to the marshal. "We thought Renton an' some o' yore boys might like to come along."

"Yu bet they will, an' I'll make another," bellowed Reuben Sarel from the veranda, adding, to a passing cowboy,

"Yu, Lafe, push them broncs in the buckboard an' send Renton here."

The foreman made no comment when he heard the story, but his lips clamped in a hard line as he turned away, and when he reappeared six riders followed him.

"Gotta leave the rest to look after things an' Miss Tonia," he explained.

"You needn't worry about Miss Tonia—she's going too," his mistress announced calmly, and shook a pretty but obstinate head to all their protests. "It is partly on my account that you are going," she pointed out. "Some of you may get hurt and then I'll be of use."

She was looking at Andy as she spoke, and that settled the matter so far as he was concerned. The marshal clinched it by deciding that she would be as safe with them as anywhere else.

They set out at once, the buckboard leading, with Green beside it, followed by Andy and Tonia, with the rest of the party strung out behind. The cowboys had not the whole of the story, but they knew that Raven was trying to get their respective ranches, and that was enough; whether he had any claim to them was beside the question; they were loyal to their owners, and they did not like the saloon-keeper. Therefore they rode gaily on an errand which might mean death for any one of them, but beneath their banter was a note of stern purpose.

"Reckon we'll put a light to the Red Ace an' chase that bastard redskin back to his wigwam," Rusty remarked.

"Shucks! Ain't there no trees in Lawless?" drawled a Double S man, whose deliberation in speech and movement had long ago earned him a nickname.

"Good for yu, Lightnin'," approved another. "I dunno what the marshal aims to do, but I'm with him, all the way."

Truth to tell, the marshal did not know himself, and confessed as much when Sarel put the question.

"I'm guessin' that arrestin' Pete an' me last night was just a bluff, an' I'm goin' to call it," he said. "It'll be a

showdown, an' I ain't ready, but he's forced my hand."

"Seth's crookeder than a cow's hindleg," Sarel observed. "He's had me by the short hair a long time past, but now I ain't carin' providin' Tonia don't suffer."

The marshal nodded. He had a fairly accurate idea of what the other was referring to, and he looked at him with a newborn respect. There was something of his more virile brother in the fat man after all.

CHAPTER XXV

They arrived at Lawless to find the street empty save for a few loafers outside the Red Ace. One of these dived headlong into the saloon at the sight of them.

Andy, the girl, and Green rode on to Durley's and met the proprietor of the Rest House at the door. His eyebrows rose at the sight of them.

"The old girl'll be pleased to death to see yu, miss," he said to Tonia, and when she had gone into the house, "Ain't tired o' life, are you, marshal?"

"Not that yu'd notice," the officer replied carelessly. "Why?"

Durley spat in disgust. "Yu must be—to come back," he retorted. "Raven's as mad as a teased tarantula, an' he's turned most o' the town agin yu. Claims to have got the goods on yu for fair, though I dunno how. There's a meetin' at the Red Ace right now to elect that runt Pardoe as marshal, and show yu up."

"We ain't been invited, but I think we oughta attend, Andy," the marshal said gravely, but the little crinkles at the corners of his eyes were well in evidence. "Our friends will shore expect it."

"Yu won't meet many there. Raven's got the riff-raff o' the place; the decent men are stayin' away," Durley told him. "I'm takin' friends with me," the marshal said, nodding to the waiting group of riders. "Round up some o' them decent men an' fetch 'em along, ol'-timer."

Durley hurried off as Tonia reappeared for a last word with her lover.

"You'll be careful, Andy, won't you?" she whispered. "Remember that you belong to me now."

"That's somethin' I ain't never goin' to forget, honey," the young man said. "Don't yu worry."

At which masculine comfort she smiled bravely and went in to do just what he had told her not to do, as a woman will.

The loungers outside the Red Ace watched curiously as the marshal and his followers tied their mounts and entered. The bar was deserted save for its custodian; with a sour sneer he watched them file through the opening into the other room.

Between forty and fifty men were congregated in the dance-hall, lounging on the benches which lined the walls, and the marshal saw at a glance that the better element in the town was not represented. Freighters, prospectors, gamblers, owners or workers in smaller saloons, with a sprinkling of Mexicans, most of them had little to lose and would be ready for anything which promised excitement and possible gain. There were several he failed to recognize, tough-looking fellows whose presence he did not understand until he saw the leering countenance of Leeson; no doubt the rustler had recruited and brought them in, probably from Tepee Mountain. On the little platform facing the door, with its worn-out piano and chairs for any other musicians who might be available, Raven was sitting. By his side was Pardoe, his head bandaged, and grouped near were half a dozen of the 88 riders. To the left of the door was an unoccupied space which the new-comers promptly took possession of. The marshal nodded nonchalantly to the gathering.

"Sorry I'm late, gents," he said. "On'y just heard o' the meetin'. Hope I ain't missed much?"

"Not a thing, 'cept the election of an honest man to take yore place," Raven told him.

Green looked round the room. "An honest man," he said wonderingly. "Leeson, I'm congratulatin' vu on—yore reformation."

This produced a laugh from some and a scowl from the saloon-keeper. "I'm meanin' Mister Pardoe," he said.

"What, The Parson?" Green smiled. "Converted hisself, has he? Yu'll shorely have to watch out, Raven, or he'll have yu at the mourners' bench afore you know it."

Durley and several of the tradesmen came in at that moment and joined heartily in the mirth the remark evoked.

Raven's contribution was a savage snarl: "He'll have yu at the Seat o' Judgment afore then, an' you'll go there through the loop of a rope." He looked at the cowpuncher curiously. "Why didn't vu keep a-travellin'?"

"Never was scared of a dawg yet—specially a yellow one—so I came back," the marshal drawled, and then the humour died out of his face and he said sternly, "Put yore cards on the table, Raven; I'm seem' yu."

The half-breed grew livid at the taunt, but he did not reply at once; he was watching the door. Soon came a scurry of hoofs outside, and a moment later Strade walked in. As though he had waited for this, Raven rose.

"Glad to see yu, sheriff; come right up," he called, and pointed to a seat on the platform.

Strade cast an appraising look at the audience and dropped on a bench beside Andy. "I'll do very well here," he said.

"Please yoreself," the saloon-keeper replied. "I got news for yu." He turned to Green. "Where was yu the day the stage was held up?"

"In yore bar, drinkin' the rotgut yu call whisky."

"An' where was yore side-kicker, Barsay?"

"Can't tell yu. I met him for the first time the day after."

Pete spoke for himself. "I was in Lawless too, swallerin' hocusssed hooch at Miguel's," he explained.

Raven's face took on a heavy sneer. "Miguel says he never seen yu till the time yu demanded money an' Green blew in with a gun an' forced him to pay it."

"Then Miguel's as big a liar as he looks," Pete retorted. "If yo're aimin' to pin that hold-up on to me, I gotta remind yu that I ain't a bit like the fella the driver described."

"Huh! A mask an' hoss make a lot o' difference, an' I reckon Eames was some flustered. Pardoe here was one o' the passengers an' he says it might 'a' bin yu—in fact, he thinks it was."

"An' Pardoe might be a truthful man, but in fact I don't think he is," Pete parodied.

"Well, we'll let that ride for a spell," the half-breed resumed. "Where was yu when Bordene was shot, Green?"

"Ridin' in from the direction o' yore ranch."

"What were yu doin' out there?"

"Lookin' for steers I suspected yu o' stealin'," came the instant retort.

Someone laughed; all the men present had not benefited by the saloon-keeper's generosity over the bank's debts.

Raven's face was wooden.

"An' yu knew Bordene was carryin' cash—yu saw him come outa the bank."

"He mighta been payin' in," Andy pointed out.

"Yu shut yore yap," the saloon-keeper snapped. "Yu can talk later. I'm doin' this."

"I'll speak when I please. I ain't takin' orders from yu, Raven, an' that's whatever," the rancher replied.

"Yu'll take 'em when yu step off the Box B," the half-breed reminded him, and then, to Green, "Leeson saw a rider on a black horse near the Old Mine 'bout the hour the killin' musta took place."

"Useful fella, Leeson," the marshal said. "Has he just remembered it?"

"He told me at the time. I kept it quiet—for reasons o' my own."

"I can guess 'em. Well, there's the hold-up an' the bumpin' off o' Bordene all nicely doped out. Yu goin' to saddle me with the bank robbery too?"

The saloon-keeper laughed hoarsely as he replied, "Yu've said it. What was yu doin' that night?"

"Watchin' yore men steal Double S steers," came the cool response.

The smiles the answer brought deepened the scowl on the questioner's face. "Likely story that, when I saw you sneakin' outa Lawless after midnight," he sneered. "That black o' yores is plenty outstanding."

It was Green's turn to laugh. "Shore is, if yu saw him that night," he said. "Nigger was in the Box B corral; I rode a paint hoss I borrowed from Andy."

If Raven was disconcerted he did not show it. "Mebbe I was mistook about the hoss—there warn't much light—but it was yu right enough, I'll swear to that," he said.

"Which, of course, convinces everybody," Green said satirically, but conscious that he spoke little more than the truth. For he knew that, up to now, Raven was winning. He was well aware of his danger. The flimsiest evidence could be made damning to unagile minds, and the resultant action would be swift and terrible.

Raven, studying his audience with cunning eyes, decided that the moment had come for his final blow. He saw Strade stand up, and raised a warning hand.

"Hold on, sheriff, in case yu say somethin' yu might be sorry for," he called out. "I got one more card to play." He bent forward, one finger of his yellow, claw-like hand stabbing the air in the direction of the marshal. "This fella calls hisself Green, but in Texas he's better known as Sudden, an' he can't deny it."

Oaths and gasps of astonishment greeted the announcement, and all eyes were turned on the man whose reckless courage and deadly gun-play had already made his name known throughout the South-west. Necks were craned to see one who had been a familiar figure to most of them for many weeks. Somehow this long-limbed, lean-faced, confident young man did not suggest a noted desperado, and they waited breathlessly for his reply.

"I ain't denyin' it," he said quietly.

Raven looked round triumphantly. "I reckon that settles it," he said. "Yo're a cool cuss, Sudden; most fellas, after wipin' out Tony Sarel, lootin' the Sweetwater bank, an' holdin' up Sands would 'a' scratched gravel, but yo're a hawg. A right smart play gettin' yoreself made marshal—I gotta hand it to yu; it was a good joke on the town

an"—his voice was acrid—"we're all laughin' at it."

"Like hell we are," came a surly growl from one of the listeners.

"Well, if Lawless don't feel amused, Sweetwater will," the half-breed went on. "Specially when it learns that its respected sheriff has been hobnobbin' with the very man he's been scourin' the country for."

Strade sprang to his feet. "Hold yore hosses, Raven," he cried. "Yo're travellin' wide o' the trail." He waved a hand towards Green. "I've knowed who this man is pretty nigh since yu appointed him as marshal."

This admission provided almost as big a sensation as the announcement of Green's identity. Strade waited calmly until the incredulous chorus of curses and ejaculations had died down. Raven was the first to speak.

"Yu knew?" he shouted. "Why in hell didn't yu arrest him?"

"When I want yu to tell me my business I'll shore ask yu, Raven," the sheriff replied tersely. "Green come to me an' explained who he was an' why he happened to be in these parts. Afterwards I checked up on what he told me an' found it was correct. I'm admittin' he has a hard reputation, but he got some of it as a deputy-sheriff in the service o' Governor Bleke, an' more was plastered on him like it has been here, which is what brought him. He warn't around when the Sweetwater plays was pulled off."

"Yu mean he didn't show up till after," Raven sneered. "What about his pardner, Barsay? Yu checked up on him too?"

"No, I ain't," Strade had to confess. "Green told me he only met him the day he was made marshal."

Ironical cheers greeted the remark, and it was easy to see that the sheriff's defence had produced little effect. Green realized that his reputation was likely to cost him his life. Some of the better type of citizen were now regarding him dubiously, and a whispered argument was going on among the cowboys from the two ranches. Then the voice of Rusty rang out with startling distinctness:

"I don't care if he's the Devil hisself, he's a man, an' I'm backin' his play agin that squaw's pup on the platform."

The saloon-keeper's cruel lips tightened at the insult and his voice was thick with passion when he replied: "Yappin' curs never did bother me. Well, boys, yu've heard my side an' Strade's. What yu goin' to do about it?"

"Hang the bushwhackin' thief an' send his pardner along for company," came from Leeson's direction. "Where's the sense in all this chatter?"

Raven's lips twisted in a Satanic smile. "We gotta be fair," he purred. "All in favour o' swingin' Sudden an' his accomplice hold up the left hand."

The result was what he expected, fully three-quarters of those present hoisting their hands. No counting was necessary.

"Reckon that fixes it," the half-breed said. "Sudden, yu ain't as popular as I thought yu was." He turned to the new officer and there was more than a touch of malice in his tone as he said: "Marshal, do yore duty."

The order fell upon Pardoe like a thunderbolt, and his puny soul shrivelled within him as he realized what it meant. He was to arrest and hang Sudden, and there he was, only a few yards away, his thumbs hooked in his belt in close proximity to the smooth butts of the guns he could use with such speed and accuracy. Despite the danger he was in, the gunman's narrowed eyes twinkled with mischievous mirth at the new marshal's predicament, and Pardoe inwardly cursed his own ambition. To fall down on his first job would be fatal to his prospects, but—he wanted to live. His appealing look at Raven proved abortive, for the half-breed was enjoying himself in his peculiar fashion—he had put a white man in an awkward position. Succour came from an unexpected quarter; it was Green who broke the silence :

"Before The Parson officiates at his own funeral, I've got' somethin' to say," he began.

A murmur of impatience ran round the room; there were loud imprecations and jeers from men whose minds were already made up. The eyes of the condemned man were chilled steel, his jaw firmed, and his lounging figure became instinct with purpose. Although they saw no movement, a gun seemed to leap into his right hand; before its menacing muzzle the murmurs died down.

"Yu listened to Raven pretty patient, an' I'm aimin' to say my piece without interruption," the wielder of the weapon said sardonically. "What Strade told yu about me is true. I'm Sudden, but I ain't the man who's been operatin' round here. I came to search out that fella an'—I think I've found him."

He paused for a moment, his gaze travelling over the faces before him. Most of them expressed an amused incredulity, but not one ventured to voice it. The keen, alert glance and levelled gun kept them silent and still. By concerted action they could overwhelm him, but it would mean death to many, and no man of them was prepared to die. for the half-breed. Raven knew this, and conscious too that the threatening gun never moved far from his own breast, he sat down.

"We'll hear yu," he said.

Green's smile had no mirth in it. "Eames an' Sands both say the hold-up's hoss had a white stocking on the near fore," he began. "How d'yu know Sudden's mount was marked like that?"

"I sent to Texas to find out," Raven returned.

"Painstakin' fella," commented the other. "Sudden's hoss is outside now, an' if yu wash away the dye yu'll find the white stockin' on the off fore. Pete wouldn't 'a' made that mistake, an' it's shore odd that both yu an' the hold-up should 'a' got the wrong information."

For an instant the half-breed looked disconcerted, and then he shrugged his shoulders. "Had it from the same source, I s'pose," he said. "Yu suggestin' I robbed the stage?"

"Why not?" came the cool retort. "Yu weren't in Lawless then, nor when Bordene was shot."

"I was at the 88 with my foreman both times."

"Huh! Kinda pity yu wiped out Jevons, ain't it?"

"I saw the boss there each o' them days," Leeson called out.

Green flashed round on him. "Shore o' that?" he asked, and when Leeson—who had not seen the black look Raven shot at him—replied that he was, Green went on, "Raven told us a while back that yu were near the Old Mine when Bordene was killed; yu say yu were at the 88; yu ain't twins, are yu?"

A loud guffaw greeted the statement, and was not lessened by the man's stammering attempt to explain. The late marshal cut him short.

"A liar should have a long memory, Leeson," he said curtly, and turned to the rest of the company. "The mornin' he was murdered Bordene drew five thousand from the bank an' went to the Red Ace to pay the money to Raven. Not findin' him there he set out for the Box B, an' yu know what happened. Later on, Raven claims fifteen thousand from young Andy."

"The note I held was for that amount," the saloon-keeper interposed.

"It was an easy document to alter," Green said. "Andy didn't dispute it, but he couldn't pay till he'd sold his cattle. He don't get no chance to do this—his herd is stampeded, not far from the 88—an' a few days on I find four o' Raven's men shepherdin' about four hundred Box B steers towards the Border. They claim they's takin' 'em back to Andy, but the trail's as crooked as the story."

"I had no knowledge o' that; I left the runnin' o' the ranch to my foreman," Raven snapped.

"Who bein' conveniently dead can take all the blame yu put on him," Green pointed out. "Well, Andy still ain't got the coin, an' at Raven's suggestion he mortgages his ranch with the bank. Then he puts a herd through an' brings back the cash to clear hisself. He has to leave on the jump after Moraga, havin' handed the dinero to Potter."

"Of which there was no record in the bank books," the half-breed sneered.

"Mebbe not, after yu'd handled 'em," Green said bluntly. "When Andy comes back he finds his money gone an' his mortgage in the possession of Mister Raven."

"Who paid for it," that worthy added.

"Talkin' o' mortgages," Green went on imperturbably, "Raven holds one on the Double S which he didn't mention when the man who signed it, Anthony Sarel, was shot, an' he's threatenin' to turn Miss Tonia out unless—she marries him."

This revelation met with a mixed reception, coarse mirth from the rougher element and growls of resentment from the better class of the audience. Raven saw he must temporize.

"Bah, she got uppity; I had to put a scare into her," he said carelessly.

"Yu were about to strike her when I happened along," Green reminded. "Miss Sarel ain't no squaw, Raven."

The oblique reference to his origin, as always, infuriated the half-breed. "Damn yu, what have my private affairs to do with it?" he screamed. "Look here—"

But the object of his wrath was looking at Leeson, watching the fellow's stealthy attempt to draw his gun behind the back of another man. He waited until the weapon was out and then fired. Leeson's pistol bumped on the board floor, while its owner stared dazedly at his perforated wrist, the throbbing agony of which brought a stream of curses to his trembling lips. The gunman, blue smoke eddying round him, swept the room with a glance, and every man grew rigid under the menacing, cold eyes.

"Another trick like that an' yu take the long hop to hell, Raven," he warned.

"I didn't tell the fool to fire. Yo're takin' a high hand, but yore neck ain't outa the noose yet. We're four to one, I reckon, an' if it comes to a showdown—"

"This town'll need a nice new graveyard."

The saloon-keeper gave a gesture of impatience. "Yu've told us a lot we knew afore," he said. "What's yore point?"

"Just this, Raven," Green said meaningly. "Yu an' this fella I'll call Sudden the Second both had the same wrong description o' my hoss, an' every crime he committed around here has been to yore benefit."

"Then I oughta be mighty obliged to yu—Sudden," the saloon-keeper sneered.

There was laughter at this, but it was by no means general and Raven began to realize that he was losing ground. He stood up.

"All these hints an' suspicions don't prove anythin'," he said. "Yo're just ryin' to blind yore own trail. If Potter could on'y speak—"

"Potter won't ever speak again," interrupted a new voice, that of the little doctor, who had just come in.

Green turned quickly. "Shore o' that?" he asked.

"I think I know a corpse when I see one, seh," Pills returned stiffly. "Potter's as dead as Pharaoh."

"Sorry, doc, I warn't doubtin' yore ability, but it may make a difference," the late marshal smiled. "I'm hopin' yu'll do me a favour."

The medico, who was already busy bandaging Leeson's wound, looked up with a whimsical grin. "So long as you make work for me instead of the undertaker I can't very well refuse," he said.

The job finished, he listened to Green's whispered instructions, nodded his head, and went out.

CHAPTER XXVI

In the dance-hall men waited, wondering what new development the doctor's errand portended. Muttering voices, shuffling feet, and an occasional hoarse laugh accentuated the silence. Curious eyes travelled from one to the other of the principal actors. Raven, leaning back in his chair, lit a cigar and affected an air of derision. Actually, he was uneasy. He knew that Green's indictment had damaged him, that some of his supporters now had doubts, and, for all his hatred, cursed him for coming back.

He looked at Green, lounging easily against the wall, gun dangling from his right hand. Certainly he appeared the least concerned of any; but for all this seeming indifference he was on the alert—not a movement escaping him. He knew perfectly well that most of those present were still hostile, that in their eyes he was an outlaw; only the production of the real criminal would exonerate him, and he was taking no chances of another treacherous attempt to shoot him down. What secret the dead banker had left behind he did not know, but he was gambling that it referred to Raven. If it did not, he lost, and—

The return of the doctor stilled all tongues. Green took the envelope the little man handed to him and held it up.

"A while ago," he said, "Potter asked me to take charge o' this, makin' me promise that nobody should see or hear of it till the breath was out of his body. That's all I know about it. I'm askin' the doc. to open it."

Utter silence reigned as Pills tore off the outer cover, disclosing another. "It says, 'Not to be opened until I am dead,' and is signed and dated," he informed them. "Come here, Inky."

The bank-clerk, whose baptismal name of Binks had thus been corrupted, shuffled forward. "That's old Potter's fist shore 'miff," he pronounced. "An' that's his private seal."

Pills nodded his satisfaction. "Having proved the authenticity of the document, is it the wish of the meeting that I make known the contents?" he enquired.

Cries of "Let her rip, doc," and "Spill the beans," came from all parts of the room; curiosity had the men by the ears. Raven alone appeared not to share it, a sneer of indifference masking his real feelings. Carefully Pills split the second envelope, drew out a folded paper, and began to read:

" 'I, Lemuel Potter, write this statement in order that, should I die, the designs of a scoundrel may be frustrated. I have deposited it with Marshal Green, believing him to be an honest man.' "

Several of the audience laughed at this, and even Green himself could not repress a clipped smile. A sharp word from the doctor restored the quiet.

" 'Years ago I was head cashier in an Eastern city bank. Bitten with the get-rich-quick mania, I speculated and got into difficulties. To meet my losses I forged cheques—I was always clever with my pen—hoping, as many a poor fool has done, that the luck would change. I got deeper in the mire. When discovery became imminent I determined to rob the bank and fly. The night watchman caught me rifling the safe; I struck harder than I intended and—killed him. For many months I dodged from place to place, a hunted fugitive, and eventually I came to Lawless and began my life anew. I thought I had escaped punishment, but alas! it was only about to commence. An old news-sheet, containing an account of the crime and a portrait, put one man here in possession of my secret, and from that moment existence became a hell. This soulless devil forced me to participate in the crimes prompted by his lust for power. To commit these with impunity, he hit upon the idea of masquerading as a notorious outlaw and made me obtain a description of this fellow's horse. In the hope of tripping him I altered one detail. He did the deeds of violence attributed to Sudden, and shot Anthony Sarel. Secure in his knowledge that I dare not betray him, he boasted to me of his acts. His manner lately has been sinister, threatening, and I know that he will kill me when I

have served my purpose. The mortgage on the Double S ranch is a forgery he compelled me to fabricate. The name of this fiend is Seth Raven, and may the curse of a wretch he has driven to despair follow him to hell—and after. " 'Lemuel Potter.' "

A long, breathless pause followed as the doctor's voice died out, and all eyes turned to the man sitting on the platform. Hunched in his seat, Raven had listened to the terrible indictment with the face of a stone image, cold, impassive. Now he stood up and—laughed.

"Well, boys, afore yu string me up let me give yu a word of advice—never do another fella a good turn," he said, and his voice was easy, confident. "What yu've heard is a pretty good specimen o' gratitude—white man's gratitude—an Injun wouldn't V done it." He paused for a moment on the sneer. "I never knew Potter was a murderer, but when he come here he told me a hard luck story, an' feelin' sorry for him, I gave him a hand. Without it, he'd 'a' been—nothin'. Of late he's been puttin' on frills, dunno why, but I can guess." He looked meaningfully at Green. "I had to call him down once or twice. He took it bad an' here's the result—that pack o' damn lies."

"Yu suggestin' Potter got hisself killed a-purpose to spite yu?" Renton asked sarcastically.

"No, Renton, I ain't," was the quiet reply. "Here's how I figure it: Potter an' Green put their heads together an' dope out that precious confession. Then, one fine night, Potter slides out with the bank funds. When he's clear away, the marshal produces this paper, which ruins me an' clears him. Later, they meet somewheres an' divvy up. It's a good scheme, but the banker overlooks a bet; he don't see that with him dead it's twice as safe an' profitable for his pardner. Think it over; why, it's 'money from home' for—Mister Sudden."

Thus, with devilish cleverness, he twisted the weapon from his own breast and directed it at that of his enemy. The explanation, plausible enough, made an impression which his sharp eyes were quick to note. He knew he had surprised them, that they had looked for a furious storm of repudiation, and he had spoken quietly, holding down with iron control the rage that threatened to choke him.

"Most o' yu have known me some time," he went on. "Am I the kind to put myself in the power of a man like Potter, or to rob a bank which was practically mine to hand yu back the money?"

"Less my thirty thousand," Andy reminded him.

Raven refused to be ruffled. "Is it likely I'd go stravagin' about the country holdin' folks up? Why, I never carry a gun," he said. "That's all I gotta say, boys. There's Sudden, an admitted outlaw an' a stranger, an' here's Seth Raven, who ain't a stranger. Which are yu goin' to believe?"

It was a superb piece of acting and brought its reward. A big, black-bearded man from the Tepee Mountain country jumped up.

"Gents, I reckon Raven has the straight of it," he called out. "I'm backin' him."

Shouts of "Good for yu, Darky" and "Here's another" followed this pronouncement, and a number of the men got to their feet, stamping, yelling, and directing threatening looks at the little group near the door. Amid all the hubbub Green stood alone, cynically surveying the noisy scene. His stem voice rang out above the din, and the very audacity of his request quelled it.

"Raven, I want the gun yo're wearin'—it's under yore left armpit. Hand it to yore friend yonder"—he indicated the black-bearded man—"or I'll drop yu right now."

The half-breed looked surprised, hesitated, but one glance at the speaker's granite face told him that the levelled gun was no mere bluff. With a scornful smile he pulled out the weapon and pitched it to Darky.

"Yo're a gun guesser, Sudden," he jeered. "Gettin' scared, huh? Yu needn't be; yo're slated for a rope. Take care o' that shootin'-iron; she's an old favourite I wouldn't like to lose, though I ain't carried one for years."

"Oh, yeah," Green said, and to the man holding the revolver, "Fetch it out here, friend, where we can all see." From the pocket of his chaps he produced two slender brass tubes and held them up. "The bullets from these killed Bordene an' Potter; I found 'em near the bodies," he went on. "Both have the same distinctive mark." He turned to Darky. "Take the ca'tridges outa that gun an' have a look at 'em."

Curiosity again rampant, the spectators clustered round and stood on the benches to watch the operation; the singular duel was not yet over. Raven alone betrayed no interest. He did not know what this new move portended, but confident in his regained supremacy, he believed he could circumvent it. One by one the black-bearded man drew out the shells, scanning each carefully. Not until he came to the last did he speak.

"Thisyer is scratched along the side—a straight line," he said, and looked at the gun. "The chamber is nicked." Green handed him the empty shells. "Would yu say they were fired outa that gun?" he asked.

Darky gave them one glance. "Hell! There ain't a shadder o' doubt," he said. "Them marks is eedential." He looked at Raven and spat disgustedly. "An' I was for him," he added. "Stranger, I'm right ashamed."

A tense silence followed the black-bearded man's verdict and instant condemnation. Swiftly the tell-tale tubes passed from hand to hand, but in every case the scrutiny was of the briefest. Familiar with weapons as all present

were the evidence was conclusive, even to the dumbest intellect. Had further proof been needed, Raven's ashen face supplied it. The blow, coming in the moment of triumph, had shattered his self-control. He knew that he was beaten, that nothing he could say or do would save him. Not only had the fatal weapon been on him, but he had admitted that he prized it; Green, too, had been astute enough to have the cartridges examined by one of his, Raven's, supporters; there was no loophole. A cold fear clutched at his heart and he cursed himself for having kept and worn the gun. Furtively he glanced about, reading his doom in the set, lowering faces of those who, but a few moments before, had been his friends. At the thought of all he had so nearly gained a madness came upon him, a fierce desire to taunt these men, to vent his spleen upon them for the last time. He rose and faced them, a sinister, evil figure.

"Yo're a clever lot, ain't yu?" he sneered. "Superior race, salt o' the earth—scum would fit yu better. Me, I'm what yu called me. The Vulture, that damned Injun, the unwanted brat of a pore white an' his copper-coloured squaw, yet I've beaten an' fooled yu all—killed, robbed, an' had yu patten' me on the back for a good fella. Bite on that! Why, if it hadn't bin for a stranger"—his gaze rested viciously on Green—"yu'd be eatin' outa my hand this minit like the dawgs yu are. Which of yu has the pluck an' savvy to plan an' do as I did? Not one o' yu."

The stinging, scornful voice lashed them like a whip and he had his moment. Silent, spellbound, they stared at the extraordinary spectacle of a criminal glorying in his evil, baiting the men at whose hands he must shortly die. Only Strade spoke:

"Yu admittin' Potter was right, Raven?" he asked.

The half-breed grinned hideously. "Yu pore pin-head, ain't I said so?" he retorted. "Potter knowed all, an' I killed him, for that, an' so's I could buy the town with its own coin." The mad laugh came again. "Oh, I played big, an' damn near got away with it."

"Yu—robbed—the stage?"

He turned on the speaker. "Yeah, Pardoe, I stole yore roll an' flung a bit of it back to yu in charity," he gibed. "Ah, would yu?"

For Pardoe, with the growl of a savage beast, was reaching for his hip. Raven's hand flashed to his breast, a shot crashed, and the gambler went writhing to the floor, and was still. The killer faced round, crouching, the smoking weapon poised.

"Fooled yu too, Sudden," he jeered. "Yu guessed at one gun, but yu didn't figure on two, did yu? Now"—the muzzle was directed point-blank at Green's breast—"if anybody makes a move, yu die." His beady eyes gloated over the man whose life he held in the crook of a finger, for Green's guns were back in their holsters. Raven broke the tense silence. "Sudden the Second is goin' to hell presently," he rasped. "Sudden the First is goin' now, damn him."

As the last words left his lips Green's right hand swept to his side. To the onlookers the reports seemed simultaneous. They saw the younger man stagger back as a bullet seared his left temple, and then Raven reeled, his knees hinged under him, and he collapsed like a house of cards. For a long moment there was no sound—men were breathing again—and then Rusty voiced the thoughts of all:

"My Gawd!" he said in awed admiration, "Raven had him covered an' he beat him to it! Sudden, huh? Well, I believe yu."

Green sheathed his gun and mustered up a grin as Pills came to bandage his hurt. "On'y a scratch, doc," he said.

"H'm, another inch to the left and yu'd have been travelling together," the little man said grimly. "I'd given you up."

"He figured wrong—reckoned I'd raise the gun, but I fired from the hip," the patient explained. "If he hadn't been so keen on cussin' me—"

At the far end of the room a crowd gathered round the fallen men; both were dead. Raven's thin lips were drawn back in an ugly snarl and between the staring eyes was the mark where the bullet had entered.

"An' we thought he never packed no artillery," Durley said.

"I knew different," Green told him. "Twice he nearly went for it; when he shot Jevons, and again when I throwed him off the Double S, but I didn't suspect he carred a brace."

"Good thing he was totin' the one he did his dirty work with," Strade commented.

"I figured he would be," the marshal explained. "Yu know how it is with a gun; they has differences, an' a fella gets fond of his own, an' wise to its little ways. When he told us it was a favourite, I felt pretty shore."

"Well, he's saved thisyer town the cost of a rope," Loder put in.

Which was the best that anyone could find to say of the late owner of the Red Ace.

* * *

Lawless was itself again when, two weeks later, Green emerged from the Red Ace and went in search of his deputy. He found him in the office, sitting with his feet on the ramshackle desk, moodily smoking.

"Howdy, marshal," the new-comer greeted.

Pete looked up. "Yo're a-goin' then?" he asked, and regret was plain in his voice. "How'd they take it?"

"One an' all they wept copious," Green grinned. "But I guess that was just to spare my feelin's. Yu see, they know yu wouldn't accept unless I pull my freight, an' they're pinin' for yu."

"Yo're seven sorts of a liar, includin' the damn kind," the little man smiled. "Dunno as I wanta be marshal anyways. I'm goin' to miss yu a whole lot, Jim." And then, with the cowboy's natural aversion to showing emotion, he added, "I'll have no one to talk to."

"Too bad we couldn't persuade Black Feather to stay put," the other suggested slyly. For the Indian, astride his Spanish horse and gripping his cherished carbine, had departed a few days earlier, refusing all offers save cartridges and a small supply of food. After solemnly shaking hands with his "white brothers" he had delivered a long harangue in his own tongue, and then, with a dignified gesture of farewell, had ridden into the wilderness. His address had left Pete gasping.

"Now whoever would 'a' guessed he had all that conversation concealed in him?" was his comment. "Would yu say he was blessin' or cussin' us?"

"I gather he was askin' the Great Spirit to make our trails pleasant, to confound our foes, an' give us plenty cattle, bosses, an' wives," was the marshal's free translation.

"I hope the Great Spirit don't hear that last bit. I don't want no wives—none whatever," Pete had said.

A recollection of this remark reminded Green of something else. "The bride an' bridegroom is due back from Tucson," he said. "Yu'll have Andy to chatter with, an' there's allus Durley."

Pete grunted. "Andy's slid back into his early childhood agin: can on'y speak one word—Tonia," he complained.

"Oh, I know she's wonderful—he told me so hisself, 'bout a million times. Durley's as bad, though he can say two words—Red Ace. Holy cats! yu'd think he'd took over the White House at Washin'ton. No, I'll have to win me a parrot, if yu must go, an' won't let me trail along."

"I have it to do," Green said gravely. "An' it's a one-man job, ol'-timer."

So the day came when Andy and Tonia stood on the veranda of the Double S ranch-house to take farewell of the man to whom they owed their happiness. Reuben Sarel, Strade, and Pete were there, and all were loth that he should leave. But he had met every protest with a slow shake of the head, and now, as from the saddle of the big black, he looked at these good friends, there was a suspicion of sadness behind the smiling eyes.

"I don't see why you have to go," Tonia told him for perhaps the twentieth time that morning.

"I got a rovin' disposition," he evaded. "Allus did wanta find out what was the other side o' the hill."

The girl gave a gesture of despair. "But you will come to see us again?" she pleaded.

At once she was reminded of that first time she had met him, sprawling outside the Red Ace. Little creases came in the corners of his eyes, and the firm lips softened under the disarming grin which made a boy of him again, as he replied:

"I'll shore be back—for the christenin'."

THE END